

Transcending Divided Worlds

Review of

Merton & Hesychasm:

The Prayer of the Heart – The Eastern Church

Edited by Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo

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Reviewed by **Albert J. Raboteau**

This collection, which originated in a conference sponsored by the Thomas Merton Foundation in 2001, is the second of a projected six volumes in The Fons Vitae Thomas Merton Series, produced under the general editorship of Jonathan Montaldo and Gray Henry. The first, *Merton & Sufism*, appeared in 1999 and the third, *Merton & Judaism*, in 2003. Although most of the pieces collected here have appeared in print previously, the editors have done a real service for readers interested in Merton and/or Orthodoxy by making them accessible in a single volume. Students of Merton have long known of his interest in Eastern Christianity, but they will be surprised at the depth of his knowledge of Orthodox spirituality and the extent of his integration of its mystical tradition into his own life and teaching.

The editors have divided the book into three parts. The first consists of several essays that explicate the tradition of hesychasm. The essays in Part Two chart and analyze the development of Merton's engagement with Orthodoxy from his study of the Greek Fathers to his reading of several twentieth-century Orthodox theologians and his correspondence with Boris Pasternak. Part Three offers a comprehensive collection of Merton's writings and lectures on the Orthodox monastic and ascetical tradition. From such a varied and rich collection, I can only select a few themes to illustrate the convergence of Orthodox mysticism and Merton's ongoing exploration of the contemplative life.

Hesychasm, most familiar to the West through the "Jesus Prayer," refers to "stillness (*hesychia*) of heart," an ancient Eastern Christian tradition of asceticism which focuses on the heart as the spiritual center of the human person and entering the heart as the place where the Christian stands in the presence of God. Bringing the mind into the heart and standing continually in the presence of God is the goal of the hesychast. Repetition of the Jesus Prayer, "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," is one means of opening oneself to receive the grace of prayer of the heart. In the first of three selections, Bishop Kallistos Ware explains the meaning of the practice of the Jesus prayer. The prayer is imageless. "As we invoke the Name, we should not deliberately shape in our minds any visual image of the Saviour. This is one of the reasons why we usually say

Albert J. Raboteau teaches in the Religion Department at Princeton University. He began reading Merton at the age of thirteen and has published an essay on Merton and Martin L. King, Jr. He is the author of *Slave Religion* (1978), *A Fire in the Bones* (1995), *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (2001) and most recently the memoir *A Sorrowful Joy* (Paulist Press, 2002). He serves as lay coordinator of Mother of God Orthodox Mission in Princeton.

the Prayer in darkness, rather than with our eyes open in front of an icon. . . . Only when we invoke the Name in this way – not forming pictures of the Saviour but simply feeling His presence – shall we experience the full power of the Jesus Prayer to integrate and unify” (55-56). It is interesting that Merton’s rare description of his own method of prayer in a letter to the Pakistani Sufi, Abdul Aziz, reveals a similar quality of still, imageless, dwelling in faith in the presence of God (*Hidden Ground of Love* 64). While Merton warned against reliance on any technique of prayer and was reticent about recommending use of the Jesus Prayer without competent spiritual guidance, the hesychast emphasis on “bringing the mind into the heart, the deepest center of the human person, as the site of God’s presence” was very close to his own understanding of contemplative prayer.

“Heart” for the hesychast and for Merton, signified “not just the emotions and affections,” but, as Ware explains, “the totality of the human person. The heart is the primary organ of our identity, it is our innermost being, ‘the very deepest and truest self’ . . . ‘the absolute center.’” In this context, “the physical heart is an outward symbol of the boundless spiritual potentialities of the human creature, made in the image of God, called to attain his likeness” (58-59). As Ware suggests, there is a close parallel between Merton’s concept of *le point vierge* and the hesychast understanding of the “deep heart,” as a spiritual center or ground of being in which one’s true identity as image of God, the presence of God, and compassion for others meet. The Fourth and Walnut experience, articulated so famously in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, might be read not only in light of Merton’s reading of Louis Massignon and Meister Eckhart, but also from the perspective of Eastern ascetic and mystical theology (5).

Merton’s interest in hesychasm and Orthodoxy generally arose from his deep commitment as a monk to learning, living, and transmitting the ascetic and mystical tradition of Christian monasticism. And typical of Merton, he saw the tradition whole, East and West. He understood the mystical tradition as “a collective memory and experience of Christ living and present within” the Church. Without “cultivat[ing] healthy and conscious traditions, we will enter into unhealthy and unconscious traditions, a kind of collective disposition to neurosis” (422). Returning to the sources of this living tradition, he developed a deep appreciation of the Desert Fathers, finding in their sayings a balanced, humane, and liberating vision of authentic Christian life. Reading the Greek as well as Latin Patristic literature, he discovered the wisdom of figures such as Maximus the Confessor, who, he thought, had “the broadest and most balanced view of the Christian cosmos of all the Greek Fathers and, therefore, of all the Fathers” (433). Maximus’ vision of the “love of Christ” hiding itself mysteriously in the *logoi* of all created things resonated deeply with Merton’s view of God’s presence in creation, accessible to humankind through natural contemplation “which discerns the inner *logoi* in events and things, their God-given meaning, inscape, specificity and nature” (110).

Merton’s search in the sources led him to encounter the works of a remarkable collection of émigré Russian Orthodox scholars associated with St. Sergius Theological Institute in Paris in the 1930s and 1940s, including Georges Florovsky, Vladimir Lossky (whose first book Merton read in the ’40s), Paul Evdokimov, Olivier Clément, and Alexander Schmemmann, major figures in twentieth-century Orthodox theology and “translators” of Orthodox thought for the West. Merton not only read and reviewed their books; his journal entries reveal how deeply their insights influenced him. Merton, himself admitted this influence and embraced it:

If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mys-

tics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. . . . If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other. . . . We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ (*Conjectures* 12).

At a time when ecumenical relations between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism seem to have stalled, at least at the official level, it is heartening to reflect on these words and to recall Merton's devotion to icons, to St. Seraphim of Sarov, and his personal observance, as early as 1960, of the anniversary of St. Silouan the Athonite. This volume, as the general editors hope, could serve as an inspiration to renewed dialogue between Eastern and Western Christians.

As with all collections of essays, some are weaker than others. The inclusion of relevant short entries from *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* does not add much to our understanding, nor does the interesting but only tangentially related section on Merton and Boris Pasternak. Misspellings mar the text. It is jarring, for example, to read of "Henri Lassaux" for "Henri Le Saux" (Abhishiktananda) (6) and "Architecture of Sounds" for "Architecture of Silence" (461). An index would have been helpful. These quibbles aside, *Merton & Hesychasm* is a rich and valuable resource to be returned to time and again – studded with eloquence and profound insight – studded with images: icons.