

Uniting Divided Worlds in Christ

Review of

The World in My Bloodstream: Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace

Papers from the 2002 Oakham Conference

of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Edited by Angus Stuart

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Reviewed by **Joseph Q. Raab**

The papers in this volume, originally presented at the Fourth General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, reveal something of Merton's astonishing empathy, his capacity to embrace, internalize and incorporate the joys and pains of the world, to maintain faith in the face of affliction, and, to paraphrase Merton, "to unite divided worlds in himself and transcend them in Christ." The volume begins with the editor's insightful introduction that explicates each of the contributions in terms of the broader theme that unites them – i.e., how a Christian can relate meaningfully and effectively to the modern or post-modern world. That question, as Angus Stuart points out, "seemed to have taken on . . . an increased urgency" (7) in the wake of September 11 and the Iraq War, and that sense of urgency permeates many of the articles.

Canon A. M. Allchin's presidential address, entitled "The Hesychast Heart of Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace," follows the editor's introduction. In this short piece Allchin highlights Merton's affinity for and indebtedness to St. Maximus the Confessor (ca. 580-662), a Byzantine theologian who defended Chalcedonian Christology against the heresies of his day. Speaking of the Jesus Prayer, Allchin reminds us that its power "is in the name which stands at its centre, the name in which human and divine meet in their fullness and integrity" (24). Likewise, as Allchin makes clear, the power and breadth of Merton's loving embrace is due to the Christ who is the center of Merton's heart.

The next section of the book is comprised of the Main Addresses by Robert Inchausti, Bonnie Thurston, and Donald Grayston. Each of their articles contributes significantly to Merton scholarship. The first, Inchausti's "Beyond Political Illusion: The Role of the Individual in Troubled Times," compares and contrasts Merton's ethical and eschatological vision for the world with Robert Kaplan's *Pagan Ethos* and Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Realism. In his paper, Inchausti shows both the similarities and the dialectical opposition between Merton's contemplative and non-materialistic worldview and Kaplan's materialistic, cynical, and utilitarian response to these troubled times. Merton's view is much closer to Niebuhr's, but Inchausti points to important differences between them, differences reflected in ways they lived out their Christian lives and that we see dramatically juxtaposed by Inchausti's characterization of Merton as a mature contemplative monk and his picture of Niebuhr as

a polished, more worldly intellectual whose familiarity with and effectiveness in “the corridors of power” made him an influential force. After effectively placing these figures in a kind of dialogue and providing much lucid commentary, Inchausti offers what he considers the authentic response to these troubled times. He calls us to “escape” this world by going beyond politics to the contemplative dimension of life where opposites can coincide and there is resurrection from death. Although I value the contemplative dimension to which Inchausti calls us, I was left wanting him to tell me more about what he calls a *surrealistic* vision, where an “escape” from the world amounts to a universal embrace of that same world.

Bonnie Thurston offered “Some Reflections on Islamic Poems by Thomas Merton.” Here Thurston provided a clear and accurate sketch of Merton’s involvement with the Sufi tradition of Islam, then commented on each of Merton’s seven explicitly Islamic poems. In her concluding remarks, Thurston suggests that Merton’s embrace of Islam was motivated and sustained by his Christian faith (51) and for me Thurston’s conclusion recalled Allchin’s thesis. This piece is superbly researched and intelligently organized. Indeed some young scholar ought to use it as a map for a thesis or even a dissertation. The scope and nature of these reflections did not permit Thurston to comment substantively on issues related to the kind of Christian-Muslim dialogue that confronts us today; such as the question of whether a “love your enemy, do good to those that hurt you” kind of ethic, clearly pronounced in many of the Sufi writings, is authentically grounded in the Qur’an and the Hadith. Again I was left wanting more, which in this case is a good thing, and wished I had been present for the discussion that followed.

Donald Grayston’s paper, “Finding ‘the Great Compassion, *Mahakaruna*’: Thomas Merton as Trans-cultural Pioneer” uses Merton’s *Day of a Stranger* as a way of illustrating the “universal embrace” in both its inward and outward aspects. Grayston shows that in that essay Merton “has embraced all our major concerns . . . : the arms race, the environment, the ecology of transcultural intellectual exchange, the role of the media, sexuality and politics, all in the context of his monastic vision and his poetic and whimsical sensibility, his life as monk and writer” (61). But by drawing upon Merton’s essay “Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy,” Grayston is able to illustrate something of the inward dimension of the universal embrace, the spiritual development culminating in a rebirth in the transformed and redeemed reality. That is to say, Grayston ends as Allchin would want, by pointing us back to Christ as the original “transcultural pioneer” and to Merton as a guide on that path that leads us to the empathic vision resulting from the final integration of the fully human and fully divine.

Next we come to the Papers and Workshops. In “The Role of Love in the Discovery of the True Self and Healing in Psychotherapy” Michael R. Sobocinski explores his theme in light of the writings of Thomas Merton, the Christian gospel, and Carl Rogers’ theory of human empathy. In his own experience, Sobocinski reflects that “Divine Love shapes in mysterious and wonderful ways the relationship between therapist and client, becoming a third silent presence in the room” (67). Though the detailed workings of this silent presence escape tidy explanations, the wisdom and eloquence of guides such as Merton and Rogers go a long way toward elucidating the role of divine love in the process of healing. I enjoyed this paper mostly because it exemplifies the valuable and practical influence Thomas Merton can have for filling out a spiritual anthropology for us in this age of psychology.

David Belcastro and Angus Stuart both focused their papers toward Merton’s involvement with,

and status among, the beat poets and writers of the late fifties and early sixties. Belcastro intelligently and effectively captured Merton's universal embrace in terms of the monk's penchant for integrating seemingly disparate realms in his essay "Thomas Merton and the Beat Generation: A Subterranean Monastic Community." Merton belonged with the beatniks by his nature as a "trickster" and by his critical reformist, *contemptus mundi* stance that placed him outside the mainstream. Belcastro shows that when Merton turned his rebellious eye toward his own monastic identity he became a reformer who wished to birth a "both/and" monasticism that embraced the sacred and secular, soul and body, heaven and earth.

Stuart's "Grace Beats Karma: Thomas Merton and the Dharma Bums" highlighted the converging paths of Jack Kerouac and Thomas Merton as beatniks and Catholic Buddhists, even pointing to the similarities in their religious epiphanies and developing perspectives on the world. This was an excellent and incipient investigation into the connections among Merton, the beats and Buddhism that Stuart intends to continue with further explorations and we happily await the fruits of his labors.

Dick Berendes and Earl Joseph Madary combined efforts in their insightful essay "Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day: The Marriage of Contemplation and Action, A Call to Radical Hospitality" to illustrate the complementary work and visions of these two twentieth-century Catholic American icons. The paper put to rest the worn-out and false dichotomy of the active and contemplative lives and showed the authenticity of each response to the gospel, even reminding us that the cloistered Merton looked upon the mendicant Day with an admiration that led him to critical self-examination. Their paper concluded with a challenging reflection on how these great souls might respond to the challenges of our post 9/11 world and how their examples challenge us. The authors confront us with the most challenging of Christ's doctrines: "love your enemy, do good to those that hate you, pray for them that persecute you . . ."

In "The World in My Bloodstream: Merton on Relatedness and Community," Thomas Del Prete recognizes the way in which notions of spiritual progress, especially ones based on conceptions of "increasing virtue," can lead to narcissism and solipsism. In response Del Prete offers an alternative conception. Instead of making the acquisition of "good habits" into a goal, he lifts up Merton's conception of community and being in relationship in order to conceive of spiritual growth in terms of suppleness to God's will, responsiveness to the invitations and demands of love. Reading this essay I was lulled into a kind of receptivity one has when practicing "*lectio divina*." I found myself meditating on it and mulling it over, savoring its wisdom. I was left feeling nothing but gratitude.

In "The Mysticism of World Faiths in Merton's Inner Experience" Judith Hardcastle considers the immensely rich area of Merton's integration of other mystical traditions into his own spiritual journey, and her paper had me nodding agreement until she reached her final conclusions. At that point I became confused. What does Hardcastle mean when she suggests that Merton's embrace of "a universalist and pluralist Christianity" marked a refusal of both "Christian exclusivism" and "Christian inclusivism" (141). In my mind, the label "inclusivism," albeit misunderstood and maligned as imperialistic, is still systematically linked with an orthodox Christology; while the label of "pluralism" (admittedly more fashionable and linked with "tolerance" and "openness") puts you in the heterodox, agnostic, relativistic, and Kantian camp of John Hick where either the normativity or uniqueness of Christ gets tossed out the window. Thomas Merton, in typical *madhyamika* fashion, would not be happy with either of these options, but we can not ignore the fact that Merton's Chalcedonian Christology led him to a Christ-centered view of human salvation (or more likely it was the other way

around), the same view taken in *Dominus Iesus*. Merton had no vow “to be correct” but his Christology was indeed orthodox and his soteriology was inclusive. If Merton’s approach to interreligious dialogue and religious diversity were to be judged by the “theological watchdogs” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as heretical, Merton’s beautiful contribution to his Church in this regard would be lost. I propose that we must move beyond the increasingly ambiguous categories of “exclusive,” “inclusive” and “pluralistic” and simply seek to understand and explicate just how Merton could be both orthodox and thoroughly open to the other; therein lies his amazing achievement and contribution. Hardcastle points us in the right direction here when she says that Merton’s search for a deeper communion “made him radically open to the Spirit in the world” (141). This insight suggests, rightly, that the key to Merton’s openness lies in an understanding of the Holy Spirit and a Trinitarian model of religious diversity, which would suggest a kinship with thinkers like Raimon Panikkar, Gavin DeCosta, Jacques Dupuis, and perhaps Bernard Lonergan.

Paul M. Pearson’s article “Redeeming the Rhinoceros: The Healing Power of the Night Spirit and the Dawn Air” offers a profound and sustained meditation on Merton’s *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and especially the third part of that book. Pearson uses this rich text similarly to the way Donald Grayston in his own article used *Day of a Stranger* to highlight and deepen our understanding of how Merton’s early *contemptus mundi* grew into a genuine love for the world, but Pearson puts it in terms of how Merton found redemption for Ionesco’s proverbial “rhinoceros” through the universal embrace of the Spirit. Pearson’s piece is second to none in this volume in terms of pure scholarship. Pearson’s command of Merton’s corpus is more than impressive and his feel for the way Merton thinks and responds to the major concerns of his day is inspiring. This is an essay, like Bonnie Thurston’s, that can serve as a template and a road map for other Merton scholars hoping to pursue a rich area for further insight.

The last of the Concurrent Session Papers is a collaborative effort by Fernando Beltrán Llavador and Sonia Petisco Martínez called “Thomas Merton’s World Discourse: Economic Globalisation versus Religious Universality.” This ambitious and highly successful piece manages to weave together the concerns of Trinitarian theology and the effects of technology and the expanding world market on developing countries. The authors draw from a wide variety of sources and a wide variety of disciplines to contrast a model of globalization that is little more than an extension *ad infinitum* of our base, unconverted and solipsistic desires and urges with a model of a universal community that emerges out of altruistic loving relationship, out of the hidden ground of the triune God who is Love. This essay is on fire with passion and intelligence and foresight. It points us toward a genuine world peace in these troubled times. My one suggestion to the authors, who clearly illustrate the dialectical opposition between these models for our future, is that they also be careful to acknowledge the potentially genetic or continuous relationship between the same models. That is to say, we need to see the latter as an outgrowth of the former through the process of conversion.

The book concludes with a poetry supplement; poems about and inspired by Merton and shared by members of the TMSGBI at the conference poetry reading. This appropriate addition helps to capture the playful and communal atmosphere of the conference and pays tribute to the poet, monk and scholar in whose memory members gathered.

Finally, I commend Angus Stuart for a finely edited book and the contributors for their finely crafted reflections. Merton scholars will be grateful for the many jewels to be found between the covers of this little volume.