

Rich and Challenging Reflections

Review of

Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton's Prophetic Vision

Edited by Angus Stuart

Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Radstock, UK: Thomas Merton Society

of Great Britain and Ireland, 2005

xiv + 157 pages / £7.99 paperback

Reviewed by **Kathleen Deignan, CND**

The published proceedings of the Fifth General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, held in 2004, compose a rich and challenging set of reflections on the crisis of living faith and faithful living in this world of war and terror. The title of the conference and of the book is drawn from Merton's Prayer for Peace, composed to be read in the House of Representatives in 1962. In it he announces the judgment of that moment, which has only deepened in our own, as he prophetically reminds the Congress: "In this moment of destiny, this moment we never foresaw, we cannot afford to fail. . . . In this fatal moment of choice in which we might begin the patient architecture of peace, we may also take the last step across the rim of chaos." The stark choice he delineates in his lengthy and unsparing prayer is the subject of the papers edited by Angus Stuart, whose deft introduction (vii-xii) neatly sets the context for the reflections to follow. In language echoing Merton's own, he rehearses the sense of powerlessness and surreality that has overtaken our generation as we face catastrophic events, and sets it in a dialectic with our need for the psychic power of faith to face "this moment of destiny." Each author takes a turn at wrestling with this challenge in light of Merton's prophetic vision.

Diana Francis, Quaker author of *Rethinking War and Peace* and the first of three plenary speakers, begins with an incisive analysis of "War, Peace and Faithfulness" (1-12) in light of Jesus' teaching. In her work of deconstructing the myth of war in light of Jesus' vision of the kingdom of positive peace, she introduces a theme that will be echoed several times in the book: the linkage of war and masculinity founded on a dominatory model of power. Though never mentioning Merton, she offers a Quaker critique of the war-mind, appealing to Gandhi and Dr. King to argue for "faithfulness" to an alternative vision of reality built on the cultivation of hope as our true defense against fear.

Tina Beattie deepens the reflection in her piece, "'Vision in Obscurity': Discerning Peace in Fearful Times" (13-26). The director of a Masters Program in Religion and Human Rights, she offers an analysis of our crisis through the paradigm of motherhood as a profound blood relationship to life expressed in the symbolic counter-face of war: birthing as opposed to killing. Here the theme

of violence and masculinity is more radically explored in her implicit and explicit critique of the dominant constructions of masculinity. She poses the complex question: to what extent might the language of maternity and birth be a resource for thinking anew about peace, in a way that takes us beyond the rhetoric of violence, terror and war that dominates so much of our political discourse? How does an ethics of motherhood relate to an ethics of peace? And then she introduces another theme that dominates these essays – the perversion of language in contemporary discourse, especially in the political order.

Fernando Beltrán Llavador's rich essay wrestles with a fundamentally Mertonian theme in "Unbinding Prometheus: Thomas Merton and the 'Patient Architecture of Peace'" (27-47). Focusing on Merton's profound reflections on Promethean theology in *The New Man and Raids on the Unspeakable*, the author refreshes and updates the various pathologies which Merton diagnosed as consequence of humankind's essential self-alienation and bondage to oppressive gods; but he goes one step further. Referencing a host of worthy interlocutors as Merton's conversation partners in the project to unbind Prometheus, he underscores the challenge to bring Merton into dialogue with explicitly feminist concerns in attempting to elaborate the lineaments of a "patient architecture of peace." Referring to the analysis of Tina Beattie in *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, and Rita M. Gross in *Buddhism after Patriarchy*, he echoes the wisdom emerging from women's experience and analysis which Merton's own androcentricity largely ignored. He ends by referencing the many advocates who have echoed Merton's call for a spiritual revolution for our age, committed to the patient, steady labor of constructing a global edifice of justice and peace, a new humanity recognizing in the unbinding of our Promethean selves, the truer Christ-self.

The next two essays deal with Merton's radical critique of language as revelatory of our mind-states and productive of our world-states. Joseph Quinn Raab revisits Merton's habit of speaking truth to power in his essay "A Naked Emperor at the Rim of Chaos: The War on Terror and the Crisis of Language" (48-59). With the spotlight on George W. Bush's religious language as it is used as a mandate for the "War on Terror," Raab dissects the messianic rhetoric of good vs. evil that informs the global vision and agenda of the United States. With particular reference to the essay "War and the Crisis of Language," he draws on Merton's analysis of the language of power and its perpetuation of violence (a theme arising from the feminist concerns mentioned earlier). He reminds us that the language of faith is predicated on the dynamics of conversion and the embrace of "the law of the cross." It is in this light that he draws Merton into confrontation with those world leaders, and Bush in particular, who usurp the language of Christian prophecy for unchristian global agendas and strategies, and reiterates the prayer for authentic prophets to expose the naked violence of our rulers.

David Joseph Belcastro also works with Merton's essay on "War and the Crisis of Language" as a way to perceive the pathologies of language in our time. In "Chanting on the Rim of Chaos: Sane Language in an Insane World" (60-72), Belcastro inverts the direction of the previous essay's analysis of political language by recovering the potency and insight of one of Merton's most troubling poems, "Chant to Be Used in Processions Around a Site with Furnaces," which he wrote prior to the Congressional Peace Prayer. The poem illustrates the way in which language can be used to obscure the inhumane and destructive use of power, and it intends to break through the illusion of innocence by setting before the reader the insane language of its "voice" – a Nazi commander consigning victims to the Holocaust. Belcastro skillfully opens not just the poem but its background in the Beat Generation's attempt to awaken their contemporaries to the obscenity of war and the perversity of

the world to which it gives rise. He helps us understand the structure of Merton's poem as an assemblage, a found-poem, whose language is actually drawn, as Merton notes, from the "very words of the commanders of Auschwitz. It would be impossible to invent something more terrifying than the truth itself." Merton had come to believe that language had become so contaminated that the serious writer could only resort to anti-language, or anti-poetry, with its intention to shock the reader into awakening through emotional incongruity and irony. Where then is one to find sane language in an insane world? In Merton's own articulation of the way of freedom, love, non-violence and hope, as he discovered it in the writings of Clement of Alexandria who reminded him that the ones who fight with the Sword of the Spirit need not violently defend their own version of the truth, but are themselves defended by the Truth.

The Northern Irish ecumenist Nigel Martin draws from his extensive experience of peacemaking in the Northern Irish context in his essay "Beyond the Politics of Peacemaking: Retrieving the Mystery of Hospitality" (73-80), focusing on Merton's capacity for conversation and friendship as skillful means to bring forward the "patient architecture of peace." Reviewing Merton's own "apostolate of friendship" with innumerable others across all cultural and religious boundaries, he makes a case for contemplative ecumenism that opens to dialogue of the heart. But as one who has lived through the long and arduous process of constructing peace in Northern Ireland, Martin warns of the forgiveness and reconciliation model of peace-building that is frequently employed in conflict situations that can mask a spirit of vengeance and sanctimony. The way of Jesus, and other patient architects of peace like Gandhi, King, Tutu, Vanier, Brother Roger and Merton himself, went beyond the politics of peacemaking to authentic, and ultimately transformative hospitality.

The Canadian writer Mary Frances Coady explores the strong impression that Jesuit Father and Holocaust martyr Alfred Delp had on Merton in her essay "Truth Hidden in Untruth" (81-88). Asked to write the introduction to his prison diary, Merton discovered a kindred spirit in this contemporary of Bonhoeffer and Rahner, one who shared his vision of a Church in dialogue and service to the secular order. Delp's youthful conscience and political theology had been formed by an encyclical written to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the ground-breaking social document of Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*. *Quadragesimo Anno* reiterated the evolving Catholic social teaching which focused on the injustice of unequal distribution of wealth, the priority of persons over property, and called for workers and employers to work in partnership for the common good. The encyclical also critiqued communism and socialism for ignoring the needs and aspirations of individuals, particularly their spiritual needs. Like Delp, Merton was also influenced greatly by the social encyclicals of John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* and *Pacem in Terris*, the prophetic urgency of which Merton felt was largely ignored. He echoed Delp's wonderment at the Church's misunderstanding of its mission in the face of world crisis, but found in the young martyr's Advent reflections not desolation but hope that even hidden in the midst of evil is grace, or as Merton said "truth is hidden in the heart of untruth." Coady ends her reflection wondering what Delp and Merton have to say to the Twenty-First Century world balanced on the rim of chaos: freedom and service – indeed, service as freedom.

The next two essays relate to Merton's engagement to the Civil Rights movement in America in the '60s. Patrick O'Connell's "Thomas Merton's Civil Rights Poetry" (89-113) offers an extraordinary exegesis of four poems written between 1963 and 1968 which explored the political and spiritual significance of key moments of the movement for racial justice. His analysis of these poems is

utterly comprehensive, offering not just his skillful rendering of Merton's poetic intentions and allusions, but also his intimate familiarity with Merton's journals for this period which provide the fuller context and provocation for each piece. The first poem, "And the Children of Birmingham," was inspired by the demonstrations in 1963 in Alabama when hundreds of young Black marchers were attacked by police dogs and hoses, arrested and jailed. "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll" commemorates Carole Denise McNair, killed by the bomb blast in the Birmingham Baptist Church, September 1963, and based on a photo her father took of her just before her murder. "Plessy vs. Ferguson: Theme and Variations" is a lengthy satiric anti-poem full of savage ironies that plays with the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court decision legitimating racial segregation. The final poem, "April 4th 1968: For Martin Luther King," is a commemoration of the civil rights leader's assassination. Each poem is masterfully "unpacked" so the reader can appreciate with O'Connell's rich sensibility, Merton's staggering comprehension of structural racism in America, the forces which keep it in play, and his vital engagement in the struggle to heal it by expose and judgment. As O'Connell notes, the tone of the poems written during these five critical and violent years, expresses Merton's pessimism over America's lost opportunity for true conversion as it hovers on "the rim of chaos."

Gerald Grudzen's article, "Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton: Prophets of World Peace" (114-28), parallels the prophetic development and maturation of these two American prophets, tracing the confluences in their thinking and the contributions each made to the social conscience of their moment. During the 1960s both men struggled to address the twin evils of racism and violence in the United States and the world, perceiving the crucial linkage between the phenomena of war and white supremacy. Noting the profound influence that Gandhi had on both men, Grudzen explores how each shared his vision of the public realm not as "secular" but as "sacred," and how both were united in a radical application of Christian morality to the problems of the modern world, challenging the separation of the moral and secular orders. He underscores how for each the centrality of non-violence was proposed as explicit and fundamental to any redress any of the social, political and economic pathologies in question. Likewise both visionaries – however Christian in their own voice and values – called for the collaboration and coalition of spiritual leaders across traditions East and West, so that the wisdom resources of the planet might be drawn upon in envisioning a new world order. Grudzen notes that Dr. King's proposed visit to Merton at Gethsemani was contravened by his assassination, and so the two prophets never met in person, a fact Merton laments to Coretta Scott King in his condolence letter to her. Though King's murder added to Merton's fatalism about political action, he did find other prophetic partners in the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh who have continued his and Dr. King's mission for peace.

Psychiatrist Larry Culliford's offering "The New Heroism – Faith and Courage: Vital Remedies against Terror and Fear" (129-37), reiterates Merton's insistence that the only cure for the spiritual cancer of hatred is a spiritual cure, and he plays off a letter Merton wrote to *The Catholic Worker* and also an essay of Emerson's, "Heroism," which addresses the challenges posed by the *Bhagavad Gita*. Culliford puts Merton and Emerson in dialogue about the true nature of the hero as one who wrestles with the sources of evil not in the external arena, but internally in terms of constructive vs. destructive thoughts, words and deeds. Culliford brings a therapist's insight and a Buddhist's skillfulness to the elaboration of the hero as one who is essentially free of the mental and emotional state of desire which is the generative ground of fear, anxiety, bewilderment, doubt, anger, shame, guilt and sadness. The foundation of heroism is a deep-seated absence of any fear of loss or threat

– even of extinction. Further, the hero’s task is to transform these negative inner states into their complementary alternatives – acceptance, serenity, confidence, contentment and joy. Finally, Culiford refers the reader to the very helpful work of James Fowler whose six-stage anatomy of faith development gives greater clarity to the process of engendering the hero, reflecting on Merton’s own movements from stage to stage which rendered him a hero and gives us orientation to be the same.

The final essay in the book is “The Artist in a Time of Crisis: Thomas Merton’s Artistic Response” (138-54) by Paul Pearson, the Director and Archivist of the Merton Center at Bellarmine University, and then Vice President of the International Thomas Merton Society. Merton was the son of landscape artists whose creative sensibility was expressed in visual as well as literary ways, and who wrote often regarding aesthetic themes. Noting Merton’s evolution as a writer, Pearson specifies how his poetry migrated from the cloister, to the desert, to the woods, to the radical deconstruction of language in his anti-poetry described in earlier essays in this volume. With these transformations in mind, he notes how Merton’s visual art follows a similar progression. The Columbia cartoonist who enjoyed drawing nudes, became, in his monastic life, more pious, turning his hand to strong but simple religious images. But as his relationship to the world eventually radicalized, so did his artistic expression, taking the form of calligraphy, graffiti, and later, photography. Recalling Merton’s friendship with his Columbia colleague, Ad Reinhardt, Pearson shares something of their correspondence that reveals the creative support and understanding he offered Merton and the influence of the apophatic mystical tradition on both these artists’ work. Merton’s final development as an artist was behind the lens of a “Zen camera” which became for him a meditative medium that moved him from clear sight to insight, and which leaves us the gift of the last forms of his contemplative fascination.

Across the Rim of Chaos is a powerful collection of essays that allows Merton’s voice to still speak through the scholars who retrieve his wisdom and set it in dialogue with the crises of our time. Each in turn offers ample evidence that his legacy is ever relevant, and more than that: urgent, essential. (For information on purchasing this volume, available from the Bellarmine Merton Center, see the information posted at: <http://www.merton.org/chaos.htm>.)