

Engaged Encounter

Review of

A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton

By Rowan Williams

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Reviewed by **Donald Grayston**

Rowan Williams, one-hundred-fourth archbishop of Canterbury, has been described as the most brilliant holder of that office since St. Anselm, thirty-sixth in the same line. In modest compass, this slim volume supports that estimation as it testifies to his ongoing interest in Thomas Merton, who, he says, “has changed the landscape of Christian reflection once and for all” (8).

It contains five articles, written between 1973 and 2008, the first when he was only 23; a poem about Merton and the summer of 1966; Jim Forest’s Foreword and Bishop Kallistos Ware’s Afterword. Jim Forest points to the “friendship” between Merton and the archbishop which sprang up after Merton’s death (something familiar to many readers of Merton), to their shared concern for the contemporary abuse of language, and to the archbishop’s appreciation of Orthodox theologians Vladimir Lossky and Paul Evdokimov. Bishop Ware focuses on Merton’s understanding of the human person, the human being-and-becoming who before God is simultaneously “nothing” and yet “all” (87).

As we start with a reading of the archbishop’s youthful *tour de force* on Merton and Evdokimov, we acknowledge the “apostolic succession” that starts with Merton, and goes through Donald Allchin, Merton’s friend and the supervisor of the archbishop’s doctoral dissertation, to Rowan Williams himself. In regard to Evdokimov’s concern for monastic “authenticity,” a reference here to Merton’s important article on the work of Reza Arasteh, “Final Integration – Toward a ‘Monastic Therapy,’” would have in my view been useful in understanding the “healing or integration of [the monk’s] previous life” (24) which is an essential element in that authenticity.

Evdokimov’s connecting of the three temptations of Christ in the desert with the monastic vows I found, I confess, a little forced. Not corrected by the archbishop, Evdokimov understands these as the *mendicant* vows of poverty, chastity and obedience

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rather than the *Benedictine* vows of obedience, stability and *conversatio morum* which Merton took. What Evdokimov evokes for the archbishop about solitude, however, is much more engaging – the seeking of monastic identity “through that perilous exposure to God in solitude which is the basis of contemplation” (30), the solitude in which is born the divine child of God’s freedom (81).

Evdokimov also appears in a later article, “The Only Real City,” dating from 2004. Here Williams cites Evdokimov’s conviction, striking for its time, that the “desert phase” (63) of monastic history, in the geographical sense, has come to an end, and that what the monastic impulse now requires is an “interiorized” monasticism “at the heart of the world . . . to be lived out in new forms” (63) – chiefly urban, one suspects. Manifestly, this is something which Merton struggled with, if not incarnated, as a public intellectual and as a radically self-critical practitioner.

It was his sense of his calling as public intellectual, in fact, that drew him so strongly to the work of Hannah Arendt, with her conviction that Christianity had had “a near-fatal effect upon the whole idea of civic life” (56), by directing its adherents’ energy towards the celestial rather than the earthly city. Merton’s response to Arendt’s critique, which he took very seriously, was to assert the role of the contemplative life in contributing to “the value of the unique individual as the necessary element in the construction of public order and public health” (57). The *polis*, in other words, needs more contemplatives. From this arises in my imagination a vision of Merton and Arendt toasting one another in heaven (in beer, one trusts) on each other’s contribution to the reclamation of a public sphere in which the poetic and the personal could be recognized as the political.

The article on Merton and Barth which is the penultimate Williams item in the book (only the poem and Afterword follow) testifies to Merton’s engagement with the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century, something which I have always seen as having a penitential character, given the mean things he said about Protestants in some of his early writings. Merton’s appreciation of Barth, I hunch, has something to do with the fiercely proclamatory character of Barth’s theology – precisely what Merton appreciated in Father Moore’s sermon at the first mass he attended at Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan, where he was later baptized. Beyond this, however, citing the passage with which *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* begins (“Barth’s Dream”), Williams presents Barth as the “prophet of divine, aggressive *agapé* mediated through the theologian’s intellect” who has even so been “secretly subverted by the divine child” (73), represented in his dream by Mozart; and surely the same thing happened for Merton. I think here of the divine child in the dream of the Great Swim, also in *Conjectures*, who gives Merton the “meal given to all who come to stay” (20) – to stay the course in the desert, in the hermitage, in the recovered paradise to which every true contemplative is brought; and also of the shift from *agapé* to *eros* in his relationship with M. in the summer of 1966.

Both Williams and Merton acknowledge the paradoxical character of the contemplative life (“nothing” and “all”), a life which both affirms and rejects “seriousness.” There is nothing more “serious” than Barth’s assertion that Jesus is the “bearer of the wrath of God” (74); and here the archbishop, starting with Merton’s strong response to his reading of Barth (“I think I shall have to become a Christian” [*Dancing in the Water of Life* 27]), understands Merton to be saying in essence that a proper theology of the death of Christ annihilates any attempt to attribute any ultimate seriousness to his self-understanding as monk or even as Christian (75). This, I intuit, is why Merton, at the end of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, invites the rest of us “to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance” (*New Seeds* 297).

Our thanks go to Gray Henry of Fons Vitae for suggesting this collection to Rowan Williams, and to the archbishop himself for responding. Its pages are few, but the harvest of their reflections is great.