

Receptive and Renewing Ecumenism

Review of

Transforming Renewal: Charismatic Renewal Meets Thomas Merton

By Andy Lord

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Reviewed by **Susan Rakoczy, IHM**

Andy Lord, a British Anglican priest, has written a thick theological interpretation of the interface of the thought of David Watson (1933-1984), British charismatic evangelist, and Thomas Merton (1915-1968), Cistercian monk and renowned spiritual writer, on the theme of the many dimensions of spiritual renewal. Lord frames his theological conversation between the two as an example of “receptive ecumenism” whose central question is “What, in any given situation, can one’s own tradition appropriately learn with integrity from other traditions?” (8). Thus, in terms of Watson and Merton and their traditions, what can charismatic renewal learn from Merton’s experience and interpretation of monastic life and how can charismatic renewal enrich the monastic tradition? Lord names both men as reformers and prophets and argues that “Renewal is deeply disruptive to existing structures and yet at the same time seeks not to simply dismiss them or the structures that embody them” (139).

A strong pneumatological and Trinitarian focus is evident throughout the book, together with various dimensions of Christology. Each of the main theological chapters concludes with a short section of commentary on a theme from the Gospel of John. After an introductory chapter entitled “Renewal through Conversation” (1-26) in which Lord introduces both men and their understanding of renewal, he builds his argument in four dense chapters.

“God’s Renewal” (27-53) examines the two men’s understanding of God. For Watson “renewal was about the restoration of the church to its ‘original state’ as seen in the New Testament” (29). Watson’s theology is profoundly Trinitarian although Lord comments that in his early days Watson had little explicit emphasis on the Father. Merton, who wrote primarily out of his own experience in a variety of literary forms, understood renewal as “a call to know the whole of God in the depths of our being, to integrate heart and mind, to appreciate the academic alongside the practical” (36). Merton’s writings on God demonstrate an apophatic understanding of God while his Christology is more cataphatic. He emphasizes that the Trinity is known “through a personal engagement of love” (37). While Watson concentrates on the historical Jesus, for Merton Christology is focused on the

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“Christ of the icons” (39). Lord also surveys various charismatic theologians who have been writing in the years since Watson died to examine how charismatic theology on the Trinity has advanced. In this conversation between two traditions, Lord emphasizes that the charismatic tradition, which often focuses on the actions of God, can learn from Merton a deeper sense of the reality of God.

The chapter “Renewal of Humanity” (54-79) discusses theological anthropology. For Watson “the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart” (57), while for Merton it is the tension between the “true self” and the “false self.” Watson also addresses this theme when he reflects on the “old self” and the “new self” in Romans, which he interprets more psychologically than does Merton. Both critique the modern world which is often blind to sin. Merton sees this renewal of the person in terms of moving from “dependence upon ourselves to dependence on the work of the Holy Spirit” (67), a perspective that Watson would also affirm. Lord says that charismatic renewal can learn from Merton an appreciation of the person as created in the image and likeness of God and thus part of God’s *good* creation, although both stress the reality of sin in persons’ lives.

The question of how renewal happens is addressed in the chapter on “The Process of Renewal” (80-118). Watson answers that this is through conversion and being filled with the Spirit while Merton stresses not only conversion, seen especially in his life journey, but also the practice of contemplation which enables renewal to continue and deepen. Watson’s writings demonstrate that renewal is “a process of thought, will, emotions, prayer, waiting, and faith” (81), which he taught systematically in his ministry of evangelism. His perspective on renewal brought him into conflict with other charismatic leaders over the understanding of “Spirit baptism” or “baptism in the Spirit.” Watson’s position was that Christians are baptized in the Spirit at their baptism with water in the name of the Trinity but that throughout life regular deep experiences of the presence and power of the Spirit are needed. For Merton, his conversion while in his 20s and entrance into the Catholic Church and subsequent vocation as a Trappist, provide the background for his understanding of renewal. Baptism provides the “seeds of the sublime life” (96) which need to be nurtured throughout life. Merton uses the word “Pentecostal” for the work of the Spirit, and states that “In that sense we are Pentecostals without necessarily having all the Pentecostal trimmings” (96). When he died in 1968, the Catholic Charismatic Renewal was not yet two years old, although he did meet with a group of Catholics involved in the Renewal. Lord sees similarities in the Roman Catholic tradition’s understanding of renewal, as exemplified by Merton, to that of Watson’s interpretation of the charismatic tradition. However, he says Merton “would challenge the charismatic tradition to reflect more deeply on how conversion is rooted more in the prior work of God than simply on the evangelistic message” (104).

The chapter titled “Renewal in Daily Life” (119-57) discusses how to live the Christian life with a focus on community and community life, both of which were essential for Watson and Merton. Renewed persons create renewed communities which worship, practice love and make disciples. Lord describes Watson’s relationship with John Wimber, who taught him much about healing and prayed with him during his treatments for cancer. The practice of discipleship must include prayer and Scripture reading and study. Disciples are to move into the world to practice their renewed life. One issue which Watson focused on was economics and he deplored the “present-day scandal of economic inequality within the world-wide family of God” (130). The extended households founded under his leadership practiced shared finances which presented many challenges to the families living together. Merton’s contemplative vision gradually enlarged so that he saw himself as one with

humanity, bound to all other persons. He was convinced that contemplative awareness developed through prayer and *lectio divina*, prayerful reading of the Scriptures and classic texts. There are differences in approach: charismatics sing songs while Merton stresses silence. Lord comments that Merton came from the opposite direction from Watson by stressing that structures and rules are real helps to live a life of love in the Spirit.

Lord names both Watson and Merton as reformers – Watson of the Church of England and Merton of Cistercian life. Merton’s widening social awareness, which included writings on racism, war, peace and non-violence, “challenges the charismatic tradition to be broader in its social awareness in ways that are clearly connected with the spiritual life of love in the Spirit” (141).

Lord states that Dorothy Day “helped inspire Merton’s entry into the Catholic church” (142). As far as I know he had no contact with Day in the late 1930s when he was preparing to become a Catholic. Perhaps Lord is thinking of Catherine de Hueck Doherty, founder of Friendship House in Harlem where Merton did volunteer work in 1941.

Charismatic renewal issues a challenge to Merton, says Lord, to enter more deeply into the thinking and practice of evangelism, while Merton can help charismatics move beyond “simple almsgiving” to forms of social action in which Christian love is made more real. A substantial section presents the views of other charismatic writers such as Richard Foster which help integrate charismatic practice with the wider currents of Christian spirituality.

The final chapter (158-77) includes reflections on various dimensions of Spirit Trinitarianism in reference to anthropology, eschatology, praxis, ecclesiology and missiology which need sustained reflection both by charismatics and the “monastic tradition” exemplified by Merton. Here Lord suggests that charismatic practices of healing, intercessory prayer and Spirit-inspired teaching and prayer would have been useful to Merton, together with new musical styles including jazz which he loved. In his concluding remarks Lord returns to “receptive ecumenism” which has framed his analysis of Watson and Merton. He argues that it has the potential “to change the nature of dialogue and challenge existing ecumenical structures” (176).

Lord’s suggestions for communication between Watson and Merton focus more on what the charismatic tradition can learn from Merton than the opposite direction. The book is not an even dialogue but it is an enriching one and should be of interesting to charismatics who wish to engage more deeply in their tradition and learn from Merton and also Merton scholars and disciples since the book will assist them to cross a bridge into charismatic thinking.