

## Taking Merton for a Ride

Review of

*A Way to God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality Journey*

By Matthew Fox

Novato CA: New World Library, 2016

xvii + 308 pages / \$18.95 paper

Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

I usually enjoy everything that Matthew Fox writes because it is in line with my own view of the goodness of creation and the manifestation of the Divine in everything on our planet. Fox's affirmation of biodiversity as important for revealing the Face of God aligns with the insights of scientists such as E. O. Wilson who see the necessity of balance in the ecosystem. My own twenty years of reading Matthew Fox with his affection for nature predisposed me to approach this new book with applause. Sadly, that is not the result: Fox is superimposing his own system of Creation Spirituality on Thomas Merton, rather than acknowledging Merton's gradual evolution of thought toward what Esther de Waal insists is not "Creation Spirituality" but a creation-filled spirituality (*The Celtic Way of Prayer* [Doubleday, 1997] 141). Basing his position (249) on a comment in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* that Merton "could be considered an advocate of what has come to be called 'creation spirituality'" (543), Fox tries to show how Merton went through the Four Paths of Creation Spirituality as defined by Fox. Surely, Merton had a spiritual journey within nature that expanded his worldview and inflamed his prayer life, but he was not, as Fox insists, discovering the "system" of Creation Spirituality that Fox has articulated in his many publications. (The *Encyclopedia* passage in question goes on to note Merton's recognition of the validity of "a healthy wariness toward the world as well," in its fallen state "as mirror of sinful, self-deluded humanity" [543-44] – comments that Fox does not cite.)

Unfortunately, this book is more about Matthew Fox than Thomas Merton. It functions primarily as a memoir – a list of moments when something in Merton, something in Fox, and often something in Meister Eckhart overlap. It is as if Fox is compressing the proverbial "six degrees of separation" into two. Three brief examples will, I hope, substantiate my point. On pages 90-91, Fox describes Merton's love for jazz and the music of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan and in the next paragraph describes how he too (Fox) was "deeply moved" by Baez and Dylan. On page 133, Fox recounts how in his final Bangkok address Merton applauded the value of reading Herbert Marcuse on the crisis of values that led to student revolutions in France and declared that a monk is essentially one who "says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent" (*Asian Journal* 334-35, 329). Fox comments how meaningful this vignette is because he, too, was once in Paris meeting with revolutionary students and

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studying Marcuse. Earlier in the book (104) Fox discusses how Merton was initially denied permission to publish his critique of Boris Pasternak's writing which he, Merton, considered "spiritually *more* significant than anything that has yet manifested itself in any of our monasteries" (*Search for Solitude* 250). Fox, in a long paragraph, then relates how his own Ph.D. thesis came to the same conclusion that was not yet generally accepted, namely, that the artist in us is necessary for a healthy spirituality. These resonances however, and there are many – conflict with superiors (3-4), reading the same books (6-7), experiencing Paris as movable feast (11), fondness for Eckhart (33-45) – do not support an argument that Merton and Fox are on the same wave-length and express spirituality in congruent ways.

To his credit, Fox does have some interesting points to make on the prophetic role of the artist. The beginning of chapter seven (108-12) is both engaging and wide-ranging, but then it segues into short sections on Eckhart, Merton on our prophetic calling, Merton on ecology, the problems of technology, Merton on racism, Merton on sanity and social conformity, Merton on living marginally, Merton, Eckhart and Marx, and ends with a curious section on Merton's death (139-42) in which Fox insists that Merton is a martyr, intentionally killed by the CIA – a position based solely on the existence of an FBI file on Merton because of his anti-war writing, but one that has been publicly discounted by his Trappist brothers and numerous Merton scholars. Fox appears to back off from his insistence on page 245 ("whether by accident or by intention is not yet determined") but returns to Merton's death on page 252 as "very likely" an assassination. In chapters eight and nine, Fox uses selected Merton quotations, attempting to refute various "heresies" that Fox has been accused of such as feminism, original blessing of creation, sexuality, indigenous people, etc. There is no real refutation going on here, merely some side-by-side quotations intended to situate Fox and Merton at the same point on the orthodoxy spectrum. The best insights on Merton can be found in the last pages of the Conclusion, in which Fox reiterates Merton's journey from dualism to a recognition of the sacramentality of the cosmos (246) and applies Eckhart's cyclical notion of "flowing out" of the Godhead and "flowing back" to the Godhead to illustrate that spiritual journey (251-57).

All that being said, I have a serious problem with the less than careful scholarship in this text. A red alert for me was that there are no recognized Merton scholars quoted on the back cover. (The front cover features a quotation praising Fox by Thomas Berry, with no reference to Merton at all.) Then when I began reading, I found myself puzzling over some of the citations from secondary sources, for example, Kathleen Deignan's *When the Trees Say Nothing* (a collection of Merton passages on nature), when the original Merton passages are readily identifiable in her carefully researched Notes. A second example: in a discussion of the value of silence (67-68), Fox quotes Merton's poem "In Silence" (*Collected Poems* 280-81). However, by using as his source Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr's analysis of the poem in her *Words and Silence* (55-58), he errs by mistakenly identifying lines she quotes as coming from another poem by Merton, when in fact they are the finale of "In Silence." And in a brief discussion of Nikolai Berdyaev's distinction between "ethics of law" and "ethics of creativeness" (102-103), Merton's lengthy quotation is attributed in the notes (272) to *Collected Poems* when in reality it is from a journal entry for June 9, 1959 in *A Search for Solitude* (288).

Furthermore, I am troubled by Fox's claim to be a "correspondent" with Merton via the misleading title of chapter two: "Merton's 1967 Correspondence with Me." The Merton Archives at Bellarmine University have a copy of Fox's letter to Merton in which he identifies himself as a spokesperson for his class of seminarians, commissioned to inquire about universities for graduate studies in spiritual

theology. Merton's response – reprinted in full on pages 16-17 of Fox's text – is not quite the personal counsel Fox claims. Having written hundreds of similar letters over more than thirty years of college teaching, I can testify that Merton's letter is more of a “formula” response than an interpersonal one that would qualify as establishing an ongoing relationship. Merton answers Fox's question by disclaiming thorough knowledge of graduate programs for spiritual theology, yet mentions the Institut Catholique in Paris as a first thought, along with two American universities as possible starting points. He notes persons and societies that might be more knowledgeable, and reinforces the importance of visiting locations such as India and consulting current books. The letter ends with an affirmation of the value of studying spiritual theology and Merton's good wishes. This, to me, is a courtesy letter that offers a few obvious and generic suggestions to point the inquirer in a potentially fruitful direction. Unfortunately, Fox casts this response as an intense affirmation of the direction his graduate studies actually take, believing that Merton's casual and polite advice is the deep spiritual counsel that set Fox on the path of his theological studies. On page 9, Fox even writes: “I owe to Thomas Merton all the trouble I have gotten into since my sojourn in Paris.” I think Merton would be horrified to learn that Fox believes he owes his life to Merton.

In the long run, this book – beautifully printed with a French-fold cover, unobtrusive end notes, and an extensive index – adds nothing new to Merton scholarship; it is essentially harmless, provided the reader realizes this text is a literary banquet of Matthew Fox, with Thomas Merton, Meister Eckhart and others as side dishes.