

Questioning the Questioner

Review of

The Merton Annual, Volume 28 (2015)

Edited by David Joseph Belcastro and Joseph Quinn Raab

Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2016

292 pages / \$19.95

Reviewed by **Mark C. Meade**

In her contribution to Volume 28 of *The Merton Annual*, Christine Bochen quotes a selection from the preface of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* that captures a theme central to the 2015 ITMS Fourteenth General Meeting and the 2015 *Merton Annual*: “A man is known better by his questions than by his answers” (59). The volume endeavors to present Merton’s life 100 years after his birth as posing a profound question which is a continual source of new revelations but cannot be limited to a simple answer. The anniversary of a death might prompt those left behind to assess a legacy of what remains. Memorializing a birth draws us into the question of Merton’s being, who he was, is, and will be to those he has inspired. Those presenting at the 2015 General Meeting, from which most of the articles in this volume of the *Annual* are drawn, were asked to consider the existential question of Merton’s life best expressed in his untitled poem cited by the conference program committee: “All theology is a kind of birthday / Each one who is born / Comes into the world as a question / For which old answers / Are not sufficient.”

The address of Pope Francis to the United States Congress in September 2015, transcribed in full in this volume (16-23), was a momentous event that introduced Merton’s name to a wider audience. The Pope presented Merton as one of four “great Americans” (17) alongside Dorothy Day, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. Though the speech came later in the year than the conference from which the papers in this volume are drawn, Pope Francis presented a succinct framing of some important themes in Merton’s writing, which also describes the second overarching theme of Volume 28. The first theme, as I presented before, is the existential question of Merton on the anniversary of his birth. The second theme is Merton’s lifelong role as questioner. Pope Francis described Merton as a “man of dialogue” and “a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time” (21). Just as the meaning of Merton’s life cannot be distilled into simplistic answers, Merton did not provide simplistic answers while challenging the certitudes of his time. His challenge happened in dialogue, retaining his own mystery and the mystery and humanity of the dialogue partners. Co-editor Joseph Raab states this beautifully in the introduction, “Celebrating the Question (and Answers)” (7-15): “God answers the question, or doesn’t, by asserting God’s irreducibility to an answer, a label, a title. . . . Created in the image of an illimitable God, human beings are marked

Mark C. Meade is assistant director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, the principal repository of Merton’s papers, and is currently vice president of the International Thomas Merton Society.

by this transcendent irreducibility, and the more one lives in accord with this likeness the more one reveals something of it” (8). The question of Merton’s being and the questioning of Merton present themes of Christian existentialism and personalism explored in this volume.

While we are on the topic of questions, one would be forgiven for asking, “Is this the second 2015 volume?” Yes and no. Volume 27, the edition for 2014, was the “2015 Centenary edition.” Volume 28, the current volume, is the 2015 edition and was released in 2016. Volume 27 published new essays celebrating Merton’s centenary. Volume 28 primarily draws from presentations at the 2015 ITMS conference, which also celebrated Merton’s centenary. Though the timeline is somewhat confusing, it makes sense to devote extra attention to a year which has seen the most publishing on Merton since his death, as attested by the running bibliography published in *The Merton Seasonal*.

As the questioning of identity and the posture of challenging dialogue present the overarching approach to Merton in this volume, more pointed themes of Merton’s writings play out in individual essays, and continue to fit the description used in the address of Pope Francis. Francis described Merton as “a promoter of peace between peoples and religions” (21). Jim Forest introduces an original piece by Merton, “Application for Conscientious Objector Status – March 1941” (24-29), in which Merton must clearly spell out his stand against war when faced with the wartime draft. Documenting Merton’s later position against war and atomic weapons is James Cronin’s essay, “A Nation under Judgment: Thomas Merton, Frank Kowalski and the Congressional Peace Prayer” (30-39). Like the address by Pope Francis, Merton’s prayer was presented to the U.S. Congress. The prayer was commissioned and read on the floor of the House of Representatives by Rep. Frank Kowalski in 1962 when the U.S. was preparing to resume atmospheric nuclear testing.

With sensitivity to Merton’s concern for the perversion of language in war propaganda, Rowan Williams writes of the value of silence and authentic dialogue in “Words, War and Silence: Thomas Merton for the Twenty-First Century” (40-53). The Holy Father’s address to Congress states that a “nation can be considered great when it . . . fosters a culture which enables people to ‘dream’ of full rights for all their brothers and sisters” and “strives for justice . . . the fruit of a faith which becomes dialogue and sows peace in the contemplative style of Thomas Merton” (22-23). The current pope and the former archbishop of Canterbury agree that contemplative silence can prepare a path to constructive dialogue for peace. It is important to know when to keep silent and when to speak prophetically, as Merton did in his prayer addressed to the U.S. Congress. As Rowan Williams argues, “Contemplation is never an alibi for not acting, nor is acting an alibi for not contemplating” (53).

In essays by Christine Bochen and Christopher Pramuk, the lens held up by Pope Francis is reversed, and Merton becomes a way of understanding the method Pope Francis uses in his dialogue with contemporary society. In Christine Bochen’s “Striving for Mercy: Envisioning the Church of the Twenty-first Century” (54-70), Pope Francis and Merton are seen as figures that helped realize an ecclesiology centered on the mercy of the person of Christ instead of understanding the Church primarily as an institution. Christopher Pramuk applies that methodology to an inclusive dialogue with all people in their incarnational diversity and the difficulty relating to the institutional church by those who do not conform to traditional gender roles or heteronormative sexual orientation. In “God Accompanies Persons: Thomas Merton and Pope Francis on Gender and Sexual Diversity” (71-87), Pramuk relies on the approach to dialogue of Merton and Pope Francis rather than relying

on definitive statements by the pope or on the scant material from Merton on these topics.

In the next group of essays, the theme of dialogue continues, beginning with some discussing Merton's East-West dialogue and some exploring the existential aspect of Merton's writings. Patrick O'Connell challenges Wm. Theodore de Bary's thesis of "Merton's failure to include Confucianism among the 'higher religions.'" O'Connell's essay, "'A Way of Life Impregnated with Truth': Did Thomas Merton Undervalue Confucianism?" (112-33), takes into account a wider array of sources to draw a more nuanced and more positive conclusion about Merton's view of one of the great traditions of the East. Fiona Gardner uses a selection from Merton's interpretation of the Taoist classic *The Way of Chuang Tzu* as a starting point for a psycho-spiritual journey in "Unlocking the Door from the Inside" (88-96). Using this Taoist metaphor and tools from psychotherapy, she embarks on the Christian project of working out salvation to experience re-birth into what she calls "resurrection consciousness." In "Consonantia in Thomas Merton: Harmony Personal, Social and Cosmic" (97-111), Donald Grayston demonstrates Merton's rootedness in a core part of Catholic tradition, taking the Latin term *consonantia* from the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, and showing Merton's use of it in an expansive way and in dialogue with eastern traditions and creative ways of interpretation.

Part of Merton's questioning of, as the Pope said, "the certitudes of his time" (21) was the contemporary sense of self and the relation of that self to God and the world. These philosophical and existential questions are at the heart of essays by Gordon Oyer and Ryan Scruggs. Oyer, in his essay "Confronting the Myth of Human Progress: Thomas Merton and the Illusion of Privilege" (149-58), demonstrates Merton's prescient inclusion of the topic of privilege at a 1964 peacemakers retreat. (This retreat was the topic of Oyer's book, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*, which earned him a Louie award for publishing from the ITMS in 2015 and is the subject of the review symposium in this volume of the *Annual*.) The concept of privilege, defined in terms of race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other categories, has become central to contemporary discussions about identity and justice. Oyer demonstrates Merton's ability to adapt an earlier use of the term by Louis Massignon in the context of religious identity and apply it to the social and political situations of his time.

Merton's postmodern awareness of the person integrated with a global community does not lead him to deflect personal responsibility into a collective, nor does he desire the modern individual alienation in the face of the absurd. He attempts to retain personal freedom and responsibility from modern existentialism but in the context of postmodern interconnectedness. In his essay "Contemplation and the *Cogito*: Thomas Merton on the Philosophical Roots of Modern Alienation" (159-80), Ryan Scruggs sees Merton's critique of Cartesian dualism as central to Merton's view that modern society fosters alienation from the self rooted in God and estrangement in one's relations to others and to creation. Further, Merton saw the subject-object split posited by René Descartes as antithetical to a contemplative mindset. Scruggs, in fairness to Descartes, cites defenses of the *cogito ergo sum* and other ways to express this concept rather than the traditional formula. Merton did not seem to have a response to this more expansive positing of this principle, but, according to Scruggs, Merton seems to be most interested in countering its negative effects on modern western culture rather than a discussion of whether it could hypothetically be defended. At the end of Scruggs' essay, the theme of how the contemplative views nature is contrasted with the view of Descartes.

Nature is central to the essay by Katharine Bubel, “‘The Terrible, the Merciful, the Mothers’: Tracing Wisdom in Merton’s *Hagia Sophia* and Malick’s *The Tree of Life*” (134-48). Bubel describes the mythopoetic language of Mother Nature, primarily in Merton’s poem *Hagia Sophia* and in Terrence Malick’s 2011 film *The Tree of Life*, rather than nature considered philosophically as presented by Scruggs. Bubel’s essay draws other themes from the mythical poles of Paradise (with the nature image of the trees in Eden) and the Fall (the shame accompanying sexual awareness in the coming of age); likewise the images of mother, Eve, Mary, Mother Nature, which can be evocative of bringing both destructive and life-giving forces to humanity. As Malick’s film uses everyday stories to point to mythical narratives, Bubel points to ways in which Merton’s autobiographical style and mythopoetics converge in wisdom myth in *Hagia Sophia*.

In “Thomas Merton: Mystic Teacher for Our Age” (181-95), James Finley rounds out our picture of Merton the personalist, teacher of wisdom and mentor. Finley, once a novice of Thomas Merton who became a clinical psychologist and popular retreat master on the contemplative life, tells the personal story of his struggle to find himself as a young monk and Merton’s frank but caring advice. Merton’s “How’s it going?” which began his sessions with young Finley becomes a starting place for inquiry. It sets aside the pretensions of the false self and gets to the business of transcending the alienated individual ego in the search for union with God. Through the eyes of Finley, we see Merton’s use of what in Ignatian spirituality is termed *cura personalis*, the care of the whole person. Finley draws on these early experiences with his spiritual master but adds reflections on the mystical life all his own. In one example, he imagines an infinite uniting with God as a stone falling endlessly further “into the bottomless abyss of God” just as “the bottomless abyss of God is welling up and giving itself away” (184-85).

The volume ends with a bibliographic review essay, reviews of publications by and about Merton, and a review symposium of Gordon Oyer’s *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat*. Co-editor David Belcastro’s bibliographic review essay of 2014 publications, “Thomas Merton’s *Conversatio Morum*” (196-214), picks up a theme that is both a monastic vow, conversion of manners, and a topic written about by one of the essays reviewed, Paul Pearson’s “The Whale and the Ivy – Journey and Stability in the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton.” Pearson had cited *conversatio morum* and stability as two vows (the extra two that those in the Benedictine tradition make) omitted in a letter to “Ping” Ferry regarding the ease or difficulty to Merton of poverty, chastity and obedience. Belcastro traces how the wide range of publications about Merton in 2014 exposes the arc of Merton’s life and the many conversions he experienced throughout his time as a monk. According to Belcastro, “Each of the publications considered here sheds light on the question initially raised: ‘What kind of a monk did Merton become?’”(211).

For those involved in the work of the ITMS, it may seem like the centenary year has stretched into multiple years from early planning to documenting the flurry of publication and activity. To borrow James Finley’s image of the stone in water that infinitely plumbs new depths, we can hope writings about Merton continue to go deeper. Volume 28 continues a process of revealing, to paraphrase David Belcastro, the monk Merton became while also revealing Merton’s ability to engage areas not yet thoroughly explored, like sexual diversity or the question of privilege. We

are challenged as a society devoted to the writings of Thomas Merton to question who we are becoming in thinking about Merton more deeply.