

Collision Course 101: The Monastery, the Academy, and the Corporation

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Had he not met an untimely death in 1968 at age fifty-three, Thomas Merton might have enjoyed celebrating eighty years of life on January 31, 1995. Festivities marking his eightieth were low-key compared to the celebrations which marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death. Two of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations provided rich fare in the way of insights on Merton's life and legacy. The first of these took the form of a symposium of discussion and reflection held from October 15-17, 1993, at St. John's University in Jamaica, New York. Some of the papers from the symposium entitled "The Vocation of the Cultural Critic" have already been published in *The Merton Annual*, volume 7. The present volume includes two papers from the St. John's symposium: Thomas Del Prete's "Culture and the Formation of Personal Identity: Dilemma and Dialectic in Thomas Merton's Teaching"; and Thomas McKenna's "A Voice in the Postmodern Wilderness: Merton on Monastic Renewal." Both attend to the ambiguous character of culture which thereby necessitates rigorous assessment so that it might contribute to authentic human flourishing.

Bellarmino College in Louisville, Kentucky, home of the Thomas Merton Center, celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary throughout the academic year 1993-1994. The highpoint of the Merton Year was a conference held from March 17-19, 1994 entitled "'The Human Way Out': The Contemplative Dimension." Parker Palmer's "Contemplation Reconsidered: The Human Way In" and Paul Wadell's "The Human Way Out: The Friendship of Charity as a Countercultural Practice"

were two keynote addresses that oriented participants to explore the contemplative dimension of various spheres of life. The volume includes four other papers given at the Bellarmine conference: Roy Fuller, "The Virtuous Teacher: Thomas Merton's Contribution to a Spirituality of Higher Education"; Julia Upton, "Humanizing the University: Adding the Contemplative Dimension"; Matthias Neuman, "Revisiting *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* after Twenty-five Years"; and Claire Badaracco, "Animated Outsiders."

Gloria Kitto Lewis's "Learning to Live: Merton's Students Remember His Teaching" is a unique contribution to the volume. An interview-based essay, this is the only paper in the volume that did not have a dress rehearsal in one of the twenty-fifth anniversary conferences. Lewis's interviews demonstrate that Merton was not only a teacher but also a mentor and friend to his students at Gethsemani, rounding out and complementing some of the themes addressed in the other contributions. It also serves as a gentle reminder that Merton's school was the monastery and not the halls of the academy.

The editors of *The Merton Annual* have avoided gathering papers around a predetermined theme. It is somewhat surprising, then, to see the extraordinary convergence of themes found in this collection. Without trying to pin down the rich array of insights offered here, it is worthwhile to note that the fruits of two of the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations provide fresh insights which enable us to see more clearly the connections among three seemingly disparate ways of life: that of the educator, the contemplative, and the cultural critic. In Merton they appear to be intrinsically related.

The title of Julia Upton's "Humanizing the University" is itself indicative of the hazards faced these days by those who teach and learn at the levels of higher education. Heirs to the monasteries of earlier epochs, the universities of the High Middle Ages became the seedbed for the very best expressions of culture. In our own day colleges and universities are gradually relinquishing their responsibility to educate the whole person in service of the human and humanizing community. Knowledge and understanding are often reduced to the transmission of technical information judged to be useful and practical; the education of the whole person reduced to skills training and job preparation. The values of academic culture are being squelched in colleges and universities today as administrators of educational institutions take on the role of corporate executive officers, breeding a corporate cul-

ture whose values fly in the face of those of academic life and educational integrity. The creation of a corporate culture in place of an academic community is no less characteristic of many private, Catholic, and denominational colleges and universities than of secular and state-affiliated educational institutions. Far too often college and university presidents, once vibrant exemplars of a cultivated intellect, now function as managers of a corporation providing an "educational product" for consumers in the marketplace.

Merton consistently raised a critical voice in the face of those "modern" institutions all too prone to depersonalization and dehumanization. Systems of education were not exempt from his critique. The basis of Merton's critique lies in a recovery of the contemplative dimension of everyday living. This provides the grounds for the recognition that authentic education of the whole person is an activity by which God is glorified.

As Parker Palmer intimates, perhaps it is only the recovery of the deepest reserves of the contemplative spirit which might serve as an antidote to the pragmatic preoccupations that propel our educational systems. In the simplest of terms, contemplation is the nonpragmatic regard for others, for created things, and for God. In a culture such as ours which is driven by narcissism, restlessness, and bottom-line pragmatism, it seems that the vocation of the teacher is closely linked to that of the cultural critic. And this vocation requires that one offer a sustained critique of the educational establishment-become-corporation. The teacher must constantly critique the college or university that has become untethered from the academic values and integrity that lie at the heart of any and all approaches to educating the whole person in knowledge, freedom, and love.

Paul Wadell's essay offers insight regarding the constituent elements of friendship as a countercultural practice. Two feature items in this volume offer further insight on Merton the man and monk by way of two of his friends: Ernesto Cardenal and Angela Collins. We are pleased to include here both sides of the correspondence between Merton and Ernesto Cardenal, from a time of critical importance in Merton's vocational struggle. Cardenal's letters to Merton are available here for the first time in English, translated from the Spanish by Roberto S. Goizueta. The correspondence is introduced by Christine M. Bochen, editor of *The Courage for Truth*, the fourth volume of letters in which many of Merton's letters to Cardenal have been published. Merton's

capacity for the friendship of charity is also seen in "Daughter of Carmel; Son of Cîteaux: A Friendship Endures." Having read the letters of Thomas Merton to Sr. Angela Collins, O.C.D., in *The School of Charity*, the third volume of letters edited by Patrick Hart, I became interested in knowing more about this Carmelite nun who had been Prioress of the Carmelite Monastery in Louisville. In the course of my interview with Sister Angela it became clear why Merton sought her counsel, and why she became his friend and confidante. I here acknowledge my gratitude to Sister Angela and the Carmelite nuns of the Carmelite Monastery in Savannah, Georgia, for the warm and gracious hospitality extended to me during my visits to the Savannah Carmel where this interview was conducted.

Victor A. Kramer's "Thousands of Words" provides a thorough survey of 1994 publications pertinent to Merton, with attention to the five volumes of his letters, particularly the fifth and final volume, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, edited by William Shannon.

The volume concludes with reviews of seven books, selected by George Kilcourse.

One of the unique contributions of *The Merton Annual* is its publication of previously unpublished or lesser known published works by Thomas Merton. It is a delight to include in the opening pages of this volume a little known essay of Merton's entitled "A Balanced Life of Prayer." Patrick Hart has provided a foreword which gives helpful orientation to the piece.

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