

## Introduction: Facing the Astonishing

---

Gray Matthews

If it were up to me, I would define the greatest project ahead for the twenty-first century to be the recovery of the sacred basis of communication. How rare, how miraculous it is when two people reach an understanding between them that also envelopes them. Far from being a possession or accomplishment, such an event is a manifestation of wonder. To be aware of this wonder – to still see it as wonder-full in a disenchanted world – is to continue to perceive the mystical face of reality.

Consider the reality of the human face itself for a moment. Max Picard begins his extraordinary meditation on the subject with this observation: “He who looks upon a human face is moved to the very core of his being . . . his whole being is plowed up.”<sup>1</sup> Picard understands the human face as the image of God and argues, “therein lies the joy that the sight of a face can give: the onlooker feels once more that he is a complete being and to that is added the greater joy of feeling this before God’s image. Not until he looked upon God’s image did he feel that he had become whole again” (Picard 3). To face the Other is to face our wholeness.

Perhaps the best word to appear in the last century for this form of relating was the word dialogue. The prefix *dia* is significant: it means to go *through* the *logos*. One penetrates the conditions of communication to realize a deeper meaning, a deeper communion, at work *through* – not *via* – the words of conversation. This is what Thomas Merton understood in the last months of his life when he was so “convinced that communication in depth, across the lines that have hitherto divided religious and monastic traditions, is now not only possible and desirable, but most important for the destinies of Twentieth-Century Man.”<sup>2</sup>

Merton began to be convinced of this in 1958 on the corner of Fourth and Walnut when, as Christopher Pramuk argues, a

---

1. Max Picard, *The Human Face*, trans. Guy Endore (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1930) 3; subsequent references will be cited as “Picard” parenthetically in the text.

2. Thomas Merton, “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue,” in *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 313.

“sophiological shift” emerged in Merton’s thinking regarding “this epiphany of God with a human face.”<sup>3</sup> Pramuk beautifully shows how this shift was then given an inspirational boost through Merton’s readings of Russian Orthodox theologians and his correspondence with writer Boris Pasternak, moving Merton to new forms of literary expression and a wider engagement with others in a world of differences and divisions.

Like Merton, philosopher Emmanuel Levinas understood dialogue to be deeper than the formation and exchange of words and ideas. In words published one year after Merton’s death, Levinas defined dialogue as the “discourse that men facing each other hold between them,” but explained that this “dialogue is thus not merely a way of speaking. Its significance has a general reach. It is transcendence. The saying involved in dialogue would not be one of the possible forms of transcendence but its original mode. Better again, transcendence has no meaning except by way of an I saying You. It is the *dia* of the dialogue.”<sup>4</sup>

Dialogue became a contemplative path for Merton, and yet, “As simple (or quaint) as the contemplative path may sound to our coarsened postmodern sensibilities,” advises Pramuk, “it should not blind us to the radical demands the Gospel places on the Christian who stands before another human being, *any* human being, face-to-face” (Pramuk 298).

When in an era of coarsened sensibilities, Picard reminds us, “we have no wish to be reminded of the whole man, we do not wish wholeness; on the contrary, we wish to be divided, and we are pleased in our state of division and do not wish to be disturbed. For that reason we do not contemplate the human face” (Picard 4). In a sublime passage about transformation, Picard echoes the hope of Merton, Levinas, Pramuk, as well as you and me:

Today we have ceased to hope for a transformation to show itself in a human face. That is why we dare divide people into distinct types, and hold them there. It has always been so in periods when the astonishing was no longer expected: the people were separated into types. And the people seem to take

---

3. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) 173-74; subsequent references will be cited as “Pramuk” parenthetically in the text.

4. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969) 137, 147.

kindly to their being imprisoned in the typical, they themselves hold the doors tightly closed in order to shut out the astonishing. But the astonishing is always capable of breaking through the bars of any type. (Picard 215-16)

This hope of facing the astonishing is exactly what I take to be our great task today, a contemplative and active task that calls for breaking through the bars of typologies that threaten to conceal and obstruct the wonders of communion. Perhaps this is what Picard meant when referring to the anticipation of “the divine surprise” (Picard 216). Such profound seeing did not die with Merton in Asia, Pramuk reflects, “but lives on today in Christians and non-Christians who dedicate themselves to the labor and grace of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue” (Pramuk 163).

The present volume of *The Merton Annual* stands as ample testimony that such dedicated labor and grace is at work today and will continue to illuminate our path throughout this century in the midst of all its technological wizardry. The majority of essays collected here reflect the work of dialogue that inspired the 2009 ITMS Eleventh General Meeting in Rochester, NY, entitled: “Bearing Witness to the Light: Merton’s Challenge to a Fragmented World.” Those who were unable to attend that conference may be grateful for the opportunity to read many of the words of wisdom that were voiced at the conference, including the presentations by three plenary speakers: Fr. James Conner, Rachel Fell McDermott and Judith Simmer-Brown.

Fr. Conner’s presentation provided the fundamental theme of the conference in speaking on “Thomas Merton – Final Integration through Interreligious Dialogue.” Final integration is precisely the hidden wholeness that Merton pursued in communion with others. Conner attests to Merton’s fervent desire to heal the divisions in himself so that he could better unite with others and commune on the pre- and post-verbal levels of communication. Rachel Fell McDermott, a Professor of Asian and Middle Eastern Cultures, examines why Merton appeared more interested in Zen Buddhism than in Hinduism in her essay, “Why Zen Buddhism and not Hinduism? The Asias of Thomas Merton’s Voyages East.” Her essay should assist many of us to consider the values of engaging in dialogue with Hinduism ourselves. As a practicing Buddhist, Judith Simmer-Brown provides significant reflections in “The Heart Is the Common Ground: Thomas Merton and Chögyam Trungpa

in Dialogue" regarding how Merton may have been viewed by Buddhist masters such as Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and his relationship to the "great completion" tradition.

Looking at Merton's experiences as recorded in his *Asian Journal*, Fiona Gardner and Tyson Anderson reflect on the final steps of Merton's journey in dialogue. In her essay, "A Kind of Arduous and Unthanked Pioneering," Gardner increases our appreciation of the kind of pioneering needed to transcend differences and divisions. Anderson, too, offers an appreciation of Merton's language of experience in "What Matters Is Clear," as he attempts to imagine the clarity Merton felt he had achieved at Polonnaruwa.

The essays by Daniel Horan and Joseph Raab offer the reader insight on the relationship between identity and dialogue in our present era of cultural and religious pluralism. In "Striving toward Authenticity: Merton's 'True Self' and the Millennial Generation's Search for Identity," Horan investigates how young people may be helped today by Merton's journey through a challenging world of fragmentation. In his article "Insights from the Inter-Contemplative Dialogue: Merton's Three Meanings of 'God' and Religious Pluralism," Raab leads the reader into ways in which Merton understood catholicity in light of his navigation into the world's wisdom traditions.

The next three authors provide a roundtable on the dialogue between Merton and the great Jewish thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Edward Kaplan leads the trio of essays with "Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton: Prophetic Personalities, Prophetic Friendship," followed by Shaul Magid's searching "Be Alone, Together: Religious Individualism, Community and the American Spirit in Emerson, Merton and Heschel." Martin Kavka takes up "The Ends of Anxiety in Merton and Heschel." All three authors share personal and eloquent narratives of their respective, dialogical relationships with Merton and Heschel.

Another substantial dialogue is deeply examined by Patrick O'Connell in "'A Son of This Instant': Thomas Merton and Ibn 'Abbād of Ronda," that between Merton and a fourteenth-century Muslim mystic introduced to him in the 1960s through his correspondence with Abdul Aziz, inspiring readers today to embark upon their own fruitful and historical dialogue with this down-to-earth Sufi master.

Our final two essays look within Merton's Christian perspective itself for insight and light on the dialogical journey. Nass

Cannon's essay retains its oral conference performance as he relates, in "No Mirror, No Light – Just This! Merton's Discovery of Global Wisdom," to Merton as a model of the seeker of universal wisdom in a Christian context and the final integration of one's true self. David Golemboski concludes matters here by reflecting on a theological aspect of dialogue in raising the question "What Kind of World-Lover? Thomas Merton on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Death-of-God Theology."

Coming full circle and reflecting on all that feeds our need for continued dialogue, I direct the reader's attention to a special interview with Fr. Conner conducted by Paul Pearson, as well as co-editor David Belcastro's splendid "2009 Bibliographic Review – Beneath the Habit of Holiness," in which he ponders the mystery of how readers of Merton's life are eventually led to read their own lives; Merton's vocation reflects our own vocations, however obscurely we live them.

In closing, I wish to pay tribute to a global pioneer in ecumenical dialogue, Raimon Panikkar, who died in 2010, the year between the Rochester conference and the publication of this volume. His life and work should remain a part of our conversation. Dr. Panikkar's unique vocation as a theologian, philosopher and scientist led him to face the astonishing with unceasingness. In his long awaited final work, *The Rhythm of Being* (a revision and amplification of his Gifford Lectures delivered in Edinburgh in 1989), he draws this reflective conclusion about his life's work: "Just as an artist sings, recites, draws, sculpts, or paints scores of sketches before the work of art is finally undertaken, I consider all that I have written as sketches for the inexpressible."<sup>5</sup> Ever careful of the traps of language that bar us from communion, Panikkar has always preferred to follow a contemplative "way of patience, contingency, and humility" (Pannikar xxx). "Keeping this in mind," he says, "I abandon the pretension to any absolutism and feel encouraged to speak out my own insights, convinced that the role of the listener is as important as that of the speaker" (Pannikar xxx). Panikkar's notion of dialogue extends beyond the realm of interhuman to include interpenetration with the cosmos: "My being does not end at the tips of my fingernails; I am also in the rivers I swim, the water I drink, the soil I tread upon, the air I

---

5. Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Gifford Lectures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010) 14; subsequent references will be cited as "Pannikar" parenthetically in the text.

breathe, the mountains I climb, the streets I walk, and, of course, the people I dwell among" (Pannikar 355). Such an attitude, he underlines with hope, "could radically change the meaning of our technocratic civilization" (Pannikar 355). For Max Picard, it was a technocratic civilization that arose to avert our gaze away from the human face by manufacturing only "technical surprises as if to convey: There are no more spiritual surprises, only the machine can astonish" (Picard 216). Like Picard, Merton, and the authors and readers of *The Merton Annual*, Raimon Panikkar will continue to live as a witness-bearer, as one who challenges a fragmented, technical image of the hidden wholeness, and as one whose life will continue to beckon us to deeper dialogue and the wisdom of facing the astonishing.

Copyright of Merton Annual is the property of Fons Vitae Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.