

A Prophet Is Never Passé: A Bibliographic Review of 2017

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Two Ways there are, one of Life and one of Death, and there is a great difference between the Two Ways. Now the Way of Life is this: first, love the God who made you; secondly, your neighbor as yourself. . . . The Way of Death is this . . . the way of falsehood, the way of haters of the truth . . . of men who have no love for the poor, are not concerned about the oppressed . . . that turn away from the needy, oppress the afflicted, and act as counsels for the rich.

*The Didache*¹

No prophet is accepted in his own country (Luke 4:24).

Introduction

Since Pope Francis praised Thomas Merton as a pioneer who challenged conventions and opened new horizons for the Church, it seems nothing gets written about him these days without referencing the pope's comments.² Francis' enthusiasm for Merton sharply contrasts with the fearful suspicion or myopic neglect of him exhibited more than a decade earlier by a decision of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). Before the Pope singled Merton out as a role model, a promoter of peace and a builder of bridges between religions and between enemies, some bishops in the U.S. dismissed him as no longer fashionable, singled him out as a renegade who had become irrelevant.³ In 2004, a sub-committee of the USCCB decided to exclude Merton's story from their *United States*

1. *The Didache, The Epistle of Barnabas, The Epistle and The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp, The Fragments of Papias, The Epistle of Diognetus*, translated and annotated by James A. Kleist, SJ, *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, vol. 6 (New York: Newman Press, 1948) 15-18.

2. Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 16-24; the text is also available on the Vatican website: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html.

3. See Deborah Halter, "Whose Orthodoxy Is It? Merton Gets Tossed from New Catechism, Victim of Latest Round Over Who Gets to Decide What's Catholic," *National Catholic Reporter* 41.19 (10 March 2005) 1, 8-10; "Merton: Persona Non Grata?" *Commonweal* 132.5 (7 March 2005) 4; available at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/merton-persona-non-grata>.

Catholic Catechism for Adults.⁴ When explaining the decision to remove Merton's biographical sketch from the final draft, Bishop Donald Wuerl suggested that Merton was omitted because he had already slipped into oblivion. The intended audience for the catechism, Wuerl said, "had no idea who he was." Even then the rationale seemed disingenuous, given that the bishops retained the biographies of over twenty American Catholics in the final draft, most of whom had far less name recognition than Thomas Merton. It is more likely that the removal had to do with the erroneous but not uncommon view that Merton was a renegade who left the Church and became a Buddhist. Bishop Wuerl faintly affirmed this notion when he said, "only secondarily did we take into consideration that we don't know all the details of his searching at the end of his life."⁵

However, commenting in 2010 on Merton's pivotal historical importance, prominent church historian Martin E. Marty said: "I did a book of five hundred years of American History in 500 pages and it ends with Merton." When presented with the observation that "Some within the Church, in high levels, think Merton is passé; that he is problematic, and we should ignore him," Marty said: "Come back in twenty years and see who is remembered!"⁶ The Merton-related bibliography for the year 2017 suggests that Merton is far more than merely remembered a half-century since his death. In this year Merton was the subject of many works including books and book chapters, scholarly articles, short homages in the popular media and even a picture book for children.⁷ Whether remembered as a rebel, a mystic, a poet or a prophet, Merton is alive and well; he remains in contemporary consciousness at the cutting edge of some important issues both within and beyond the Church.⁸

Books by and about Merton

A few books appeared in 2017 attributed directly to Merton in some way. Jon Sweeney's expertly edited *A Course in Christian Mysticism: Thirteen*

4. *The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006).

5. Ann Rodgers, "Catholic Bishops Approve National Adult Catechism," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (19 November 2004).

6. See Vaughn Faile, OFM, "An Interview about Thomas Merton with Dr. Martin E. Marty," *The Merton Annual* 25 (2012) 23-29. Marty was referring to his book *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1984).

7. Gregory Ryan and Elizabeth Ryan, *The ABCs of Thomas Merton: A Monk at the Heart of the World* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2017).

8. I would like to thank Professor Melissa Sissen, Research Librarian at Siena Heights University, for helping to locate and acquire many of the items reviewed in this essay. I also wish to thank my colleague Dr. Eric Kos for reading drafts of this essay.

Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk brings together, in an accessible form and manageable size, a selection of Merton's conferences on persons and themes from the Christian contemplative tradition.⁹ Sweeney takes his selections mainly from Thomas Merton's more expansive *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, edited by Patrick F. O'Connell.¹⁰ If O'Connell's contribution benefits specialists and scholars with its treasure of erudite notations that provide important context and explanation, then Sweeney's concise and abridged version will benefit the generalists, the dilettantes and the sincere seekers who prefer to encounter the insights at the heart of the mystical tradition without the garnishing of meticulous, historical detail. Dr. Ian Bell, whose doctoral research focused on the intersection of mysticism and political action, reviews this book with greater focus in the following section.

Merton is a co-author of *From the Monastery to the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal*, translated and edited by Jessie Sandoval (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017). Cardenal was a novice under Merton but left Gethsemani to return to Nicaragua and later went on to support the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in revolution against the Somoza regime. The two remained friends through letters until Merton's death in 1968. Merton's side of the correspondence has been available in English since Christine Bochen, who reviews Sandoval's book later in this volume, selected and edited the fourth volume of the five-volume series of Merton letters published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.¹¹ Both sides of the correspondence have been available in Spanish since Santiago Daydi-Tolson published the letters as *Del Monasterio al Mundo*,¹² but not until Sandoval's work has the full correspondence been available in English; also new is the "Translator's Afterword" (247-52) where the editor explains her own interest in the

9. Thomas Merton, *A Course in Christian Mysticism: Thirteen Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk*, ed. Jon M. Sweeney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).

10. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008); briefer segments are drawn from Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 1*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005) and Thomas Merton, *The Cistercian Fathers and Their Monastic Theology: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 8*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2016).

11. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 110-63.

12. *Del Monasterio al Mundo: Correspondencia entre Ernesto Cardenal y Thomas Merton (1959-1968)*, ed. Santiago Daydi-Tolson (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuatro Proprio, 1998).

correspondence. I am always inspired and often amazed by stories from people all over the world who describe how Merton has come into their lives, and Sandoval's story is no exception. Her parents had fled Nicaragua and come to the United States. She was born in Los Angeles, but her family returned to Nicaragua when she was a toddler. A few years later, they moved back to California. While she does not provide the precise dates of these moves, there is no mistaking that her formative years were affected by the upheavals in Nicaraguan politics that can be traced back through the years spanning the correspondence (1959-1968), but boiled over into horrid carnage in the late nineteen seventies and into the nineteen eighties. Revisiting these letters, it appears, helps Sandoval make some sense of those chaotic times and her own family's migrations. The letters, she notes, "hold great personal significance to me, not only because they are historical documents . . . but also because as we read deeper, into each letter, these dates, timelines, names, and grand political ideas slowly give way to the immediate occupations of daily life and the quotidian struggle of finding meaning, purpose, and love."¹³

The final book that Merton's own name can be pinned to is one that Merton himself had translated from the French, albeit anonymously, and annotated with substantive commentary in 1948. The book Merton had translated was written by the Trappist Jean-Baptiste Chautard, a celebrated spiritual writer in his own right but whose name was also absent from the translation Merton rendered for his brothers. That 1948 edition¹⁴ was mainly an "in-house" resource for the monks of Gethsemani, so there seemed to be no need to identify either Chautard or Merton. In 2017, however, almost seventy years later, Dom Elias Dietz, OCSO, the current Abbot of Gethsemani, brought the text out of obscurity, reintroduced it with a new foreword, and through Ave Maria Press has made it available to a much wider and contemporary audience.¹⁵ This little spiritual resource and reflection on the Benedictine charism of simplicity has been enthusiastically endorsed by a considerable number of scholars and seekers.¹⁶

13. *From the Monastery to the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardinal*, translated and edited by Jessie Sandoval (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2017) 249-50.

14. *The Spirit of Simplicity Characteristic of the Cistercian Order. An Official Report, demanded and approved by the General Chapter. Together with Texts from St. Bernard of Clairvaux on Interior Simplicity. Translation and Commentary by A Cistercian Monk of Our Lady of Gethsemani* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1948).

15. Jean-Baptiste Chautard, OCSO, *The Spirit of Simplicity*, translated and annotated by Thomas Merton (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2017).

16. Laudatory comments are included on the jacket and in the front matter from Paul Pearson, Jonathan Montaldo, Daniel Horan and Carl McColman.

Fr. Lawrence Morey, OCSO, a monk of Gethsemani who was close to Abbot Dietz's project of bringing Merton's translation of *The Spirit of Simplicity* out of the cloister, reviews the book in greater detail in this volume of *The Merton Annual*.

In 2017 Merton was featured in several books as an influential and often referenced source, or as the focus of a chapter, and some of those books get reviewed in the following section.¹⁷ He was, however, a principal focus of Kathleen Witkowska Tarr's *We Are All Poets Here: Thomas Merton's 1968 Journey to Alaska*, a well-timed commemoration of Merton's last days in America, just before his Asian pilgrimage that ended with his untimely and mysterious death in Bangkok. Tarr, an Alaskan writer herself, renders a personal spiritual memoir that intertwines with and is informed by Merton's story and especially those seventeen days he spent in "The Last Frontier" before heading to the East. Tarr's engaging memoir is reviewed in this volume by Patrick F. O'Connell.

Merton was also the central focus of Kenneth Bragan's *Natural Spirituality: Thomas Merton, and Christian Renewal*.¹⁸ In this book Bragan highlights possibilities emerging from the field of neuroscience that may help bridge traditional *belief* in the resurrection with a spirituality grounded in religious *experience*. This is a well-intentioned project and it does point toward exciting and new avenues of inquiry in what Aldous Huxley first called neurotheology.¹⁹ I am not equipped to critically assess the work's merit in terms of its reading and use of the field of neuroscience, but I find its reading and use of Thomas Merton provocative and heterodox. Bragan relies upon a controversial dichotomy between two fundamental *forms of faith* – one grounded in beliefs and one grounded in mystical or spiritual experience. He presents Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a model of the former and Thomas Merton as a model of the latter. Even if Bragan tries to avoid a dialectical opposition here, he pits *belief* against *experience* when he writes: "I reveal which side I am on when I say that I

17. Patricia Schnapp reviews James Forest's *At Play in the Lions' Den: A Biography and Memoir of Daniel Berrigan* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017); Christian Raab, OSB reviews Bishop Robert Barron's *To Light a Fire on the Earth: Proclaiming the Gospel in a Secular Age* (New York: Image Books, 2017); Wendy Crosby reviews Fred Dallmayr's *Spiritual Guides: Pathfinders in the Desert* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), which has a chapter dedicated to Merton; Michael Martin reviews Michael Plekon's *The World as Sacrament: An Ecumenical Path toward a Worldly Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), which also has a chapter on Merton.

18. Kenneth Bragan, *Natural Spirituality: Thomas Merton, and Christian Renewal* (Strategic Book Publishing, 2017).

19. Aldous Huxley coins the term in his utopian novel *Island* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962).

do not believe in the deity of Christ and do not understand what [is meant] by the personality of God. For me, God is Spirit, the creative spirit of the universe that can be experienced as a ‘presence’ in states of meditation and prayer” (6). This means that Merton is regarded as the champion of Bragan’s *side*, but this declaration reveals that Merton and Bonhoeffer actually have more in common with one another on the level of faith than either does with Bragan. They are both confessing Christians.

Merton certainly finds a way to God through contemplative *experience* but it takes a selective reading of Thomas Merton to construe him as representative of *one side* of what for him would be a false dichotomy. For example, speaking of mystical experience as one of limitlessness (void), transcendence, fullness and freedom, Merton affirms it to be real, natural and transcultural, but then says: “All that is ‘interesting’ but none of it touches on [the “personal communion with Christ at the center and heart of all reality”], the mystery of personality in God, and His personal love for me. . . . I have freedom, or *am* a kind of freedom, meaningless unless oriented to Him.”²⁰ In other words, Merton does not oppose his experience of the transcendent with his conviction that the ultimate reality is interpersonal and communal. Bonhoeffer practiced meditation and contemplative prayer and Merton believed Christ to be the Incarnate Word and wisdom of God.²¹ It is not that Merton would reject Bragan’s “side” of coming to an indeterminate faith through universally available religious experience, but he would resist having his own “form of faith” set against Bonhoeffer’s and certainly question any vision of a *Christian renewal* that prescind from defined orthodoxy. I imagine Merton would consider trying to advance a Christian renewal by denying the divinity of Christ and gutting Trinitarian doctrine about as absurd as Hazel Motes trying to found his “Holy Church of Christ without Christ.”²²

In 2017 Now You Know Media, which has been producing Merton-related educational audio materials for over a decade, released a series of twelve lectures by theologian and Merton scholar Daniel P. Horan, OFM

20. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 259.

21. See for example William Apel, “Engaged Spirituality: Thomas Merton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Christian Renewal,” *The Merton Journal* 17.2 (Advent 2010) 26-32.

22. Hazel Motes is the main character in Flannery O’Connor’s novel *Wise Blood* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1952); Motes, a returned soldier whose religious beliefs have been shattered, tries to escape his being haunted by Christ by forming a Church that denies Christ.

entitled *Thomas Merton for Our Time*.²³ This series, available in both CD and downloadable MP3 formats, does a remarkably substantial job of introducing the listener to the breadth and depth of Merton's corpus and goes a long way toward unveiling Merton's almost shocking relevance for our own turbulent times. As Cassidy Hall noted in her own review of these lectures, Merton is "both eerily and comfortingly relevant" and Horan does a marvelous job elucidating that truth.²⁴ Since Horan is looking to highlight Merton's timeliness, it's not surprising that the centerpiece of these lectures becomes Merton's prophetic voice in the nineteen sixties. Whether discussing war and violence (Lecture 6), Pacifism and non-violent resistance (Lecture 7) or racism and racial injustice (Lecture 9), Horan never fails to expertly select arresting, convicting and compelling quotations from Merton, and to insightfully unpack their implications for both personal and social transformation. This is a worthwhile binge-listen for anyone wanting a sustained and insightful meditation of Thomas Merton *for our time*.

Articles

The first piece I remember appearing on Merton in 2017 was an Op-Ed in *The New York Times* titled "What Thomas Merton and Muhammad Ali Had in Common." It was authored by Lonnie Ali for the occasion of what would have been the seventy-fifth birthday of her late husband. In her essay Mrs. Ali was contemplating that corner in Louisville, Kentucky where Muhammad Ali Boulevard intersects with Fourth Street at a place called Thomas Merton Square. Muhammad Ali Boulevard was Walnut Street until 1978. Twenty years prior to the renaming of that street, on a March afternoon in 1958, that corner and the people milling about it occasioned one of Merton's most famous and pivotal epiphanies.²⁵ Lonnie Ali's piece begins from the physical space that now interlocks the legacies of these men who were both poetic and prophetic pugilists in their own ways, fighting racial injustices, standing against the Vietnam War and sharing a belief that God could not be confined to any one religious tradition. Recalling Muhammad Ali's memorial service, Lonnie Ali wrote: "Like Merton, whom he had never met, Muhammad was naturally drawn to the

23. Daniel P. Horan, *Thomas Merton for Our Time* (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2017).

24. Cassidy Hall, "Merton Our Contemporary," *The Merton Seasonal* 43.1 (Spring 2018) 28.

25. See Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82; and Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.

power in all faiths and at his direction his memorial service included an imam and an Islamic scholar, two Baptist ministers, two Jewish rabbis, a Roman Catholic priest, a Native American tribal chief and faith leader, and a Buddhist monk.²⁶ She further noted that Pope Francis' description of Merton as a man who "challenged the certitudes of the time" is no less applicable to her late husband. Ali ends her reflection with a quote from Merton regarding happiness. Happiness, Merton wrote, can't be a matter of living always at the highest peak of *intensity*. He said, it is "not a matter of intensity but of balance, order, rhythm, and harmony."²⁷ I can't say for certain, but I think she was drawn to this quotation because Merton's description of "balance and order and rhythm and harmony" evokes the image of her husband in the ring at the height of his powers. This welcome homage touches some of the most enduringly attractive aspects of both men and recalls Merton the mystic, the peaceful warrior for justice, and the champion of religious diversity and dialogue.²⁸

In November 2015, two short months after the pope had spoken approvingly about Thomas Merton as a promotor of peace and dialogue, Francis X. Clooney, SJ delivered a lecture on Thomas Merton to an audience at Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky. The talk became the basis for another presentation a couple of weeks later delivered at the American Academy of Religion conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Eventually, that talk/paper became the article "Thomas Merton's Deep Christian Learning across Religious Borders," published in *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 37 (2017) 49-64.²⁹ In this illuminating study Clooney shows how Merton's catholicity nourishes his expectant attitude regarding the truth and value of other traditions. Specifically, Clooney proposes that Merton's immersion in the Rule of St. Benedict helps to account for and in some sense explain Merton's capacity to study other religions or contemplative traditions not as artifacts or exotic oddities but as instantiations of and

26. Lonnie Ali, "What Thomas Merton and Muhammad Ali Had in Common," *The New York Times* (17 January 2017).

27. Merton's original sentence is actually slightly different. It reads: "Happiness is not a matter of intensity but of balance and order and rhythm and harmony" (Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955] 127).

28. A similar piece, "Icons of Compassion: How Interfaith Advocates Thomas Merton, the Dalai Lama and Muhammad Ali Impacted Kentucky," was published as part of the booklet *Compassion: Shining Like the Sun* (Louisville, KY: Center for Interfaith Relations, 2017) 15-21, commemorating the 2017 *Festival of Faiths* conference held annually in Louisville. William Apel also had a short piece appearing in the same booklet: "Out of Solitude: Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin and Racial Justice" (39-43).

29. Clooney includes a short note preceding his numbered endnotes that explains the evolution of the published piece from its origins as a talk.

witnesses to a living wisdom that is transcultural and therefore catholic. In this article, Clooney reveals something of Merton's method and strategy at work in his cross-religious studies. He notes that Merton always acknowledges determinate differences, finds ways to move to a new horizon that transcends and includes the differences, and explicates that new vista within a Christian framework. This is what Clooney means by "deep Christian learning across religious boundaries." It is a "deep learning" because it requires accessing this wisdom at a level of consciousness that is trans-cultural and trans-religious, it is "Christian" since Merton always appropriates this wisdom in the concrete *as a Christian*, even when he is learning from "across religious boundaries." Beyond being a very fine study of Merton's practice, Clooney's work is important because it helps to put flesh on the bones of Pope Francis' assertion that Merton "opens new horizons for the Church" in the realm of interreligious dialogue.

It was a delight to come across John Smelcer's piece "Finding Thomas Merton" in the progressive Jewish magazine *Tikkun* and to get a glimpse into a marvelous story of friendship, loss, love and discovery.³⁰ It was a couple of years ago that I began to hear rumors of newly discovered/recovered luggage trunks full of Merton's belongings. Last summer I saw some of the items they contained displayed at the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville, but I did not know what a fascinating story was behind their resurfacing. By providence or happenstance the acclaimed author John Smelcer stumbled onto the story, became fascinated by it and was swept up in it. It is the story of a feisty and determined young nun who befriended Thomas Merton in the late sixties, and through a series of events that included falling in love with and eventually marrying one of Merton's Trappist brothers, becomes by Abbot Flavian's request the heiress and protective guardian of a secret trove of Merton's personal belongings. Nearly fifty years after Helen Marie came into possession of Merton's belongings, and after her husband had died, she let the items come to light. Smelcer's rendering of the story is quite riveting and he calls his piece "the first written account of the story." Let us hope this is a hint of more to come.

A couple of Merton scholars, Ron Dart and Patrick O'Connell, had more than one article appear in 2017. Ron Dart has written many pieces on Thomas Merton over the years in which he examines an issue or a subject by creating a kind of conversation between Merton and another poet, thinker, writer, mystic or otherwise prominent historical figure.³¹

30. John Smelcer, "Finding Thomas Merton," *Tikkun* 32.3 (Summer 2017) 46-51.

31. Dart has placed Merton in conversation with personalities such as Alan Watts, George Grant, Leslie Dewar and Jack Kerouac. For a list of Dart's articles, see Patricia

Dart published three such pieces in 2017. Whether putting Merton in a conversation about the psalter with his contemporaries C. S. Lewis and Bede Griffiths, or about the counterculture with the German poet and novelist Hermann Hesse, or pairing him with the towering humanist Erasmus, Dart consistently renders illuminating contrasts and comparisons.³² I should mention here that Detlev Cuntz published a similar kind of piece that put Merton in dialogue with the Jewish, German-speaking poet Paul Celan;³³ as did Fiona Gardner, who paired Merton with the English priest and monk Harry Abbott Williams.³⁴ These pieces, each one interesting in its own right, illustrate Merton's capacity to function as a hermeneutic lens for the lives and works of others. They also serve to highlight something of the breadth of what Michael Higgins has called Merton's "extraterritorial nature."³⁵

Patrick O'Connell produced two critical studies of Merton's poetry. One focuses on early poems related to Bible stories, and the other on later works imbued with prophetic social criticism that remain disturbingly germane. In "From *Lectio* to Lyric: Thomas Merton's Early Poetry on Biblical Narratives"³⁶ O'Connell shows how Merton's practice of *lectio divina* trains him to enter into Biblical narratives, and experience them in challenging and refreshing ways, beyond the worn and familiar drone of pious platitudes. O'Connell examines six of Merton's early poems and illustrates precisely how they "rework narrative passages of Scripture in order to participate imaginatively in the events being related, and so to discover and convey their spiritual significance for speaker and for reader alike" (314). O'Connell succeeds admirably in showing how

A. Burton's *'About Merton'-Secondary Sources 2000-2015* (Louisville, KY: Thomas Merton Center, 2015); available at: <http://www.merton.org/Research/Resources/ABOUT-Supplement-2016.pdf>.

32. Ron Dart, "Reading the Psalms: Thomas Merton, C. S. Lewis and Bede Griffiths," *Clarion Journal* (1 July 2017); available at: http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/07/; "Hermann Hesse and Thomas Merton: Countercultural Affinities," *Clarion Journal* (18 May 2017); available at: http://www.clarion-journal.com/clarion_journal_of_spirit/2017/05/, and the chapter "Erasmus and Thomas Merton: Soul Friends," in his book *Erasmus: Wild Bird* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017) 9-28.

33. Detlev Cuntz, "In Dialogue with Thomas Merton: Paul Celan's Poetry after Auschwitz," *The Merton Journal* 24.1 (Eastertide 2017) 50-60.

34. Fiona Gardner, "Thomas Merton and Harry Williams: Through Breakdown to Spiritual Breakthrough," *The Merton Journal* 24.1 (Eastertide 2017) 37-46.

35. See Michael Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998).

36. Patrick F. O'Connell, "From *Lectio* to Lyric: Thomas Merton's Early Poetry on Biblical Narratives," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 52.3 (2017) 311-45.

Merton, having entered meditatively into the scriptures, creatively renders his experience with a lyrical precision that sacramentalizes his own poetry – so that these poems “can serve as potential catalysts for readers to participate in this experience themselves” (314). As a poor exegete of poetry, this reader is grateful to O’Connell for doing for these poems what these poems do for O’Connell and for the Biblical narratives. In “Prophetic Orientations: Merton’s Social Critique in ‘A picture of Lee Ying’ and ‘Paper Cranes’”³⁷ O’Connell explores two of Merton’s poems written in the nineteen sixties, when the poetry increasingly reflected “his engagement in the crucial social issues of his time, including war, racism and poverty” (30). The first of the poems O’Connell explores, “A Picture of Lee Ying,” was inspired by a newspaper photograph Merton described as a “Heartbreaking picture of a Chinese refugee girl collapsed in sorrow at the borders of Hong Kong, where hundreds of thousands are now refused entry and turned back into Red China by the British.”³⁸ The second poem, “Paper Cranes,” presents the origami peace symbol as more powerful than feathered hawks, expressing a hopeful yearning for peace in a war-torn world where nuclear weapons darken the horizon. O’Connell unpacks the poems, illuminating the proximate conditions in Merton’s life that helped produce them as well as their prophetic relevance for his world and ours. It is eerily strange that as I read O’Connell’s piece, the U.S. President, who has already scuttled the Iran nuclear deal, announced that he will send up to fifteen thousand troops to the Southern border to prevent a caravan of a thousand refugees from entering the country. A thousand faces of Lazarus, of Lee Ying, of Mary pregnant and seeking a room, are about to be on the U.S. border, and Merton’s prophetic and poetic voice still cries in the desert.

Another essay examining Merton’s poetry is Sonia Petisco’s “The Seduction of the Divine: Thomas Merton’s Experience of Love as Self-Abandonment.”³⁹ In this compelling piece Petisco takes a clear-eyed and close-up look at the poems born out of Merton’s affair with M. in the spring of 1966. By positioning the poems in the rich and ancient mystic-poetic tradition that blurs or obliterates the lines between erotic and divine love, a tradition that includes Rumi, John of the Cross and allegorical readings of the *Song of Songs*, Petisco illuminates Merton’s appreciation of

37. Patrick F. O’Connell, “Prophetic Orientations: Merton’s Social Critique in ‘A Picture of Lee Ying’ and ‘Paper Cranes,’” *The Merton Journal* 24.2 (Advent 2017) 30-47.

38. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 220.

39. Sonia Petisco, “The Seduction of the Divine: Thomas Merton’s Experience of Love as Self-Abandonment,” *The Merton Journal* 24.1 (Eastertide 2017) 23-33.

M. as a hierophany, and his encounter with her as an encounter with the God who is Love. However, Petisco's presentation is not Pollyannaish; it does not ignore the scandalous messiness and anguish of the affair that put Merton "at war with [his] own heart" (29) and likely tortured M. as well. Rather it illuminates the dark mystery of love that can be trusted even as it calls forth a total self-abandonment.

Two other essays appearing in the Advent issue of *The Merton Journal* consider Merton's prophetic message in ways that elicit parallels with and applications to our contemporary world. The first is Gary Hall's piece "All Bystanders Now?" which is a refined expansion of a presentation that Hall offered along with the late Donald Grayston at the International Thomas Merton Society's conference in Louisville, Kentucky in 2015.⁴⁰ By beginning with Merton's image of the bystander as an exceptional person, a monk or an intellectual who is voluntarily marginal and set apart by the shape of his or her vocation, Hall reinterprets the bystander as a kind of everyman. Drawing on the more contemporary work of Zygmunt Bauman, the Polish philosopher and sociologist, Hall suggests that we are all bystanders now, conditioned by technology and consumerism into roles of passive observance. The challenge Hall brings into focus is to move from *guilty* bystanders to socially responsible actors and he presents Merton as the potential patron for assisting that move.

The second piece zeros in on a precise transitional moment when Merton himself moves from bystander to a socially engaged and prophetically polemical critic. James Cronin's "Fear Thy Neighbor: Merton and the 1961 Shelter Scare"⁴¹ illustrates how Merton, compelled by the epistolary invitation of the young Jim Forest in 1961, began to speak out for peace and love amidst the cold-war paranoia and the ominous threat of nuclear destruction. The cold war and the nuclear threat contributed to a culture of fear in which even the Catholic ethicist Fr. Laurence McHugh, SJ would argue in print that Christians would be morally justified, in the event of a nuclear attack, to sequester themselves and their families in shelters that lock out their refuge-seeking neighbors.⁴² McHugh's consequentialist and utilitarian approach to the problem of shelter scarcity in a post-apocalyptic setting seemed to Merton to lead not just to an untenable moral position for a Christian, but to an abhorrent one at that. Cronin examines this pivotal moment in compelling and convincing fashion and

40. Gary Hall, "All Bystanders Now?" *The Merton Journal* 24.2 (Advent 2017) 3-13.

41. James Cronin, "Fear Thy Neighbor: Merton and the 1961 Shelter Scare," *The Merton Journal* 24.2 (Advent 2017) 61-68.

42. See Laurence McHugh, "Ethics at the Shelter Doorway," *America* 105.27 (30 September 1961) 825-26.

presents Merton as an ethicist within the Virtue tradition and a radical advocate of total peace and the common good.

Fr. McHugh's essay that was so pivotal to provoking Merton's prophetic fire appeared in 1961 in the Jesuit publication *America*. The last two essays I discuss here, Angelo Jesus Canta's "What Thomas Merton Would Say about War with North Korea"⁴³ and Andrew Lenoir's "Lessons from a Hopeful Bystander" appeared in *America* fifty-six years later. Canta's piece takes up Merton's prophetic mantle with a quick and challenging response to comments made by the evangelical pastor Robert Jeffress, who claimed just days earlier that God had authorized Donald Trump to "take out" by whatever means necessary the North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un.⁴⁴ Jeffress' public comments provoked Canta the way McHugh's did Merton, and Canta's pithy piece presents Merton's Christian pacifism as the proper moral response to the Korean crisis and exposes jingoistic rationalizations of violence as patently opposed to the gospel message.

Finally, Andrew Lenoir's "Lessons from a Hopeful Bystander"⁴⁵ was the cover story for the October 16, 2017 edition of *America*. It paints an ugly picture of the world we have made – a world of increasing political polarization, devaluing of human life and the environment, and the demonization of those with whom we disagree. Technology and social media may exacerbate the problem, enabling us to "become cocooned within our preferred bubbles." Lest we believe this is something new, however, Lenoir consistently reminds the reader how similar our world is to the one Merton was born into in 1915, and the one he left in 1968. Yet in relation to many contemporary issues such as the environment, technology or immigration, Lenoir convincingly reveals Merton's prophetic voice. As his title suggests, however, Lenoir not only sounds the prophetic rebuke, but points us in the direction of the hopeful vision Merton ever maintained, a vision of the world redeemed and restored, a world in which the God who is Love finds a home.

Conclusion

A few days prior to my writing this, CNN news anchor Chris Cuomo read a lengthy quotation from Thomas Merton off his teleprompter during *CNN*

43. Angelo Jesus Canta, "What Thomas Merton Would Say about War with North Korea," *America* (10 August 2017); accessed at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/08/10/what-thomas-merton-would-say-about-war-north-korea>.

44. Sarah Pulliam Bailey, "'God has Given Trump Authority to Take out Kim Jong Un,' Evangelical Advisor Says," *The Washington Post* (9 August 2017).

45. Andrew Lenoir, "Lessons from a Hopeful Bystander," *America* (16 October 2017) 26-32.

Prime Time.⁴⁶ Cuomo was drawing attention to what the U.S. President was doing to turn out his voter base for the 2018 mid-term elections. From Cuomo's perspective, Donald Trump was deliberately holding a stream of rallies for his fan base with the intention of spreading the fear that a massive caravan of desperados, infiltrated by middle-eastern terrorists, was heading north toward the U.S. border. To assuage the fear he was creating, Trump promised to send thousands of military troops to the Texas border; he has since done so. In an effort to illustrate the insidious nature of Trump's approach, and to call forth a response to refugees that would be love-based rather than fear-based, Cuomo turned to the modern prophet Thomas Merton and read:

A mass-movement readily exploits the discontent and frustration of large segments of the population which for some reason or other cannot face the responsibility of being persons and standing on their own feet. But give these persons a movement to join, a cause to defend, and they will go to any extreme, stop at no crime, intoxicated as they are by the slogans that give them a pseudo-religious sense of transcending their own limitations. The member of the mass-movement, afraid of his own isolation and his own weakness as an individual, cannot face the task of discovering within himself the spiritual power and integrity which can be called forth only by love. Instead of this, he seeks a movement that will protect his weakness with a wall of anonymity and justify his acts by the sanction of collective glory and power. All the better if this is done out of hatred, for hatred is always easier and less subtle than love. It does not have to respect reality, as love does. It does not have to take account of individual cases. Its solutions are simple and easy. It makes its decisions by a simple glance at a face, a colored skin, a uniform. It identifies the enemy by an accent, an unfamiliar turn of speech, an appeal to concepts that are difficult to understand. And then fanaticism knows what to do. Here is something unfamiliar. This is not "ours." This must be brought into line – or destroyed. Here is the great temptation of the modern age, this universal infection of fanaticism, this plague of intolerance, prejudice and hate which flows from the crippled nature of man who is afraid of love and does not dare to be a person. It is against this temptation most of all that the Christian must labor with inexhaustible patience and love, in silence, perhaps in repeated failure, seeking tirelessly to

46. Chris Cuomo ended his November 1, 2018 *CNN Prime Time* broadcast with the long quotation from Thomas Merton; the clip is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4XHYjgddCU>.

restore, wherever he can, and first of all in himself, the capacity of love and understanding which makes man the living image of God.⁴⁷

The point was clear. If Trump plays identity politics to cultivate fear of the “other,” Merton seeks to restore a vision that discovers Christ in the stranger. There remains a deep hunger for this vision. Because Merton is thoroughly committed to the non-dual and paradoxical vision that underpins the common-good ethic, he must acknowledge, paradoxically, that sometimes we face genuine either/or options. That is to say, a “both/and” position means accepting that there can be *both* “both/and” *and* “either/or” situations. Trump’s “either/or” means “us or them” and this presents a false dichotomy which derails a common-good ethic, cultivates fear and leads to war. It rests on a simplistic dualism that supports the illusion that one side or another, one group or another, is pure and good, while the other is dangerous and evil. It fails to see that God alone is good, and evil acts can be distinguished from the persons who perform them. But the gospel’s “either/or” is presented in stark terms at the beginning of the *Didache*. It is a true dialectic between *the way* of love and *the way* of hate, *the way* of truth and *the way* of lies. These ways meet up at the latter’s terminus, where the way of lies and the way of hate dead-ends. But the way of love, the way of truth moves on through death into new life. This way embraces the love of *both* our neighbors *and* our enemies and welcomes the stranger.

In the days just before Chris Cuomo read Merton’s half-century-old thoughts on a Christian resistance to totalitarianism, and even more so in the days immediately following, this exact same passage was shared and reposted tens of thousands of times on social media. Merton’s prophetic call continues to spread. He has gone viral. So much for Bishop Wuerl’s assessment.

47. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 133-34.