

# A Vocation of Unity

Review of

*Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*

By William Apel

Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006

xxi + 202 pages / \$19.00 paperback

Reviewed by **Christopher Pramuk**

In the final chapter of his book *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, 1993), George Kilcourse offered an assessment of Merton's witness to interfaith dialogue that still stands out for its balance and clear-headedness, especially with respect to Merton's *limitations*. When it comes to the "extremely complex and difficult" theological questions raised by interfaith dialogue, "Merton's readers come away with occasional disappointment," Kilcourse writes (see 217-19). On the one hand, the strength of Merton's interfaith witness is that he "consistently avoids reducing the dialogue to theological investigations"; on the other hand, Kilcourse astutely asks whether Merton does not confine theology "to an unnecessarily narrow definition and thus 'bails out' of legitimate questions." While acknowledging that it "is certainly unfair to expect Merton to resolve such questions," Kilcourse laments that Merton "repeatedly retreats from a necessary theological project," indeed, sometimes to "to an embarrassing degree."

These critical observations serve well to frame both the strengths and the weaknesses of William Apel's new book, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*. The book's strength resides in Apel's narrative and experiential approach to interfaith dialogue. Like Merton, the author refuses to reduce the challenges of dialogue "to theological investigations," adopting instead what Kilcourse calls a "sapiential" approach, a commitment to dialogue not on the level of theology or doctrine but from the wordless ground of religious experience. Yet here is also where the book disappoints, for Apel's exposition so one-sidedly emphasizes "experience" over doctrine that he manages to "bail out" of crucial theological questions – questions that are not only begged by these interfaith letters, but which remain indispensable, I believe, both for understanding the "real Merton" and for engaging in the task of dialogue today.

Let me begin with the clear strengths and potential contributions of this new study. Apel's thesis is clear, resoundingly urgent, and elegantly demonstrated in ten highly readable chapters. Amidst the terrifying violence and fragmentation of our times, he argues, there have emerged "universal" men and women who serve the human community as vivid "sacraments" or "signs of peace." The experience and wisdom of these "interfaith pioneers" – namely, Merton and those with whom he engaged in dialogue (Thich Nhat Hanh, Abdul Aziz, D. T. Suzuki, Abraham Heschel, and five oth-

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ers) – can help “move us forward toward the world of peace with justice they envisioned” (xx). In their lives and public “vocation of unity,” a “redemptive word” is spoken into our present world situation.

Readers unfamiliar with the extraordinary catholicity of Merton’s last decade, or those like myself who seek a greater understanding of the biographical details of these interfaith friendships, will be well served by this book. Indeed, Apel honors his subject best when he provides the reader with the needed context for these letters with straightforward historical detail: “Who was Ananda K. Coomaraswamy? Before examining the Merton-Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy letters, we need to answer this question, because it provides the historical and spiritual context for understanding their exchange” (162). Each chapter begins with this kind of helpful table-setting, and each offers well-chosen citations and photos. In this way, *Signs of Peace* merits a place alongside other (now indispensable) offerings from Orbis Books (*The Merton Encyclopedia* and *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*) as an introductory reference guide for readers delving into this important aspect of Merton studies.

Yet the strengths of Apel’s book and the urgency of its thesis do not always overcome its more notable weaknesses. The least serious of these is the author’s penchant for romantic flight and over-simplification. The chapter on the Merton-June Yungblut letters, for example, while punctuated with riveting text – e.g., Yungblut’s devastating Vietnam poem, “This is the Child” – taxes the reader at times with overly sentimentalized commentary: “Be not afraid. A new day is dawning. It may be delayed, but it cannot be denied”; “Peacemakers like June Yungblut had already landed on the beachheads of a warring world. Soon the world would be transformed – God willing” (156-57). In a later chapter, after citing Merton on his desire to “live gently, non-violently, firmly, in all humility and meekness, but not betraying the truth,” Apel is compelled to add, “God was, as always, the source of this truth” (174). Time and again the regular reader of Merton may ask: is this edifying hyperbole or is it romantic veneration? At such moments one would wish for less hagiography, more frequent citations from the letters, and greater trust in the reader’s capacity to connect the spiritual dots embedded in these remarkable texts.

The more serious problem, however, with Apel’s approach to this important subject is his almost complete unwillingness to engage issues of theology or doctrine, save when the topic forces itself into the discussion. A striking example, and perhaps the most stringent test case for the author’s method, comes in his back-to-back treatment of the Merton-Heschel and the Merton-Suzuki letters (Chapters 5 and 6). Citing from Edward Kaplan’s masterful study of Heschel, *Holiness in Words*, Apel ably charts the close kinship between Merton and Heschel with respect to their shared sense of the Bible as God’s word, and more elementally, their mutual experience of God’s radically transitive love for humanity, what Heschel calls God’s *pathos*: “The God whom we thought we were seeking,” Apel writes, “is actually pursuing us. Of this Merton and Heschel were certain. The Almighty calls out our name. The One whose name is too sacred to utter actually knows each one of our names” (81).

The contrasts could not be more striking in the following chapter on Zen, where Apel cites Suzuki: “The basic idea of Zen is to come in touch with the inner workings of our being, and to do this in the most direct way possible, without resorting to anything external or superadded. Therefore, Zen rejects anything that has the semblance of an external authority. Absolute faith is placed in a man’s own inner being. For whatever authority there is in Zen, all comes from within.

This is true in the strictest sense of the word” (90). While Apel identifies with some subtlety those aspects of Zen that so appealed to Merton, he fails to address in any critical depth the theological questions raised by Merton’s concurrent dialogue with both Heschel and Suzuki. For example, is it really the case – as Merton intimates in the Suzuki letters, and Apel uncritically agrees – that “his Zen Buddhist friend saw Christianity, in its essence, more clearly than many Christians” (93)? Is the “essence” of the gospel really “a Zen-like commitment to ‘direct experience,’ unmediated by preconceived structures” (93)? Or is not Christianity’s essence much closer, both in doctrine *and* experience, to Heschel’s mystical-prophetic account of a personal God’s headlong pursuit of human beings? To his credit, Apel admits that “For Suzuki, there could be no transcendent reality, at least not in the Christian sense of a belief in God” (93). Yet he avoids or simply flattens out the most pressing questions begged by this substantive point.

In short, how do we reconcile the fact that Merton experienced such a deep kinship with Heschel *and* Suzuki, Abdul Aziz *and* Thich Nhat Hanh? How could Merton describe himself in his later years – with complete integrity, I believe – as both “a true Jew under my Catholic skin” *and* as Nhat Hanh’s spiritual “brother”? The unmentioned theological elephant in the room here is the Incarnation, by no means merely a “doctrine” for Merton so much as an ongoing *event* at the center of history, a revolutionary *experience* that can and should transform our whole “way of seeing” reality, and to be sure, the non-Christian other. Would Merton have been able or so inclined to forge these interfaith friendships had his religious imagination not been profoundly shaped by the twin doctrines of Creation and Incarnation, two sides, really, of the same coin?

It would certainly be unfair to expect Apel to solve the myriad theological questions raised by these interfaith letters. Yet what concerns me about this study is the author’s inclination, perhaps for the sake of “unity” or rhetorical suasion, to confine theology “to an unnecessarily narrow definition,” just as Kilcourse accuses Merton of sometimes doing. This is the temptation (not wholly unjustified!) to dismiss theology and doctrine as abstract, authoritarian, and divisive, while celebrating religious “experience” as pure, concrete, democratizing, and unifying (e.g., 18, 23, 93, 115, 129). The unfortunate result is a study that tends to exacerbate the now rather tired dichotomy between doctrine and experience, theology and spirituality, tradition and mysticism. While such a separation may appear on the surface to facilitate dialogue between Christians and non-Christians, it errs by forgetting that the manifold languages of tradition (scripture, liturgy, art, icon, chant, doctrine) are what give rise to mystical experience in the first place, and not generally the other way around.

At his best, Merton recognized the overdrawn split between doctrine and mystical experience and labored hard to resist it. In his conference notes, “An Introduction to Christian Mysticism,” given to the pastoral theology students at Gethsemani in 1961, he notes, “Without mysticism there is no real theology and without theology there is no real mysticism.” What we must really do, he insists, is “live our theology.” In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), he says that to experience God or the mystery of Christ “is always to transcend the merely psychological level and to ‘experience theologically with the Church’” (46); and in this late work, as Kilcourse notes, “Merton pointed to the doctrine of the Trinity, and a genuine dialogue of theology, as the promise of the future” (215). In short, to detach Merton from the Great Tradition that shaped his imagination is to turn him into either a mystical “pioneer” who went where few of us can follow, or a faithless maverick who forsook his Christian identity at Polonnaruwa.

In the final analysis, the “real Merton” is certainly found in these interfaith letters, as Apel sug-

gests, but surely not *only* here. If we would seek to discover the wellspring of Merton's catholicity, we would do well, I think, to revisit carefully crafted spiritual writings such as *New Seeds*, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, and *Raids on the Unspeakable*. Such texts were written, after all, during years of extraordinary tension and creativity for Merton, and written with special concern for the "diaspora" Church, that is, for fellow Christian pilgrims trying to find their way in a fractured and unspeakably violent modern world. It is significant that Merton directs our gaze in these texts not to some nameless "presence" or the hidden "God behind God," but to *Christ*, the Wisdom of God, whose light transfigures all creation with resurrection hope, and whose presence shines in the face of every human being. "If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God," he writes in *New Seeds*, "there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ" (296).

Notwithstanding such reservations, the success and real contribution of *Signs of Peace* lies in its capacity, when read reflectively, to break through the jaded "post-Christian" imagination of our times with a divine and profoundly *human* word of hope. By urging us gently toward greater openness and a willingness to be transformed by the wisdom of others, Apel unveils the "sign-bearing" power of human life, of *every* human life, to reveal the very One whose self-emptying love gives birth, in every new moment, to the whole of creation.