

## Discerning Strange Voices

Review of

*The Voice of the Stranger*

By James Conner, OCSO, David Scott and Bonnie Thurston

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Reviewed by **Matthew Emile Vaughan**

*The Voice of the Stranger* is a compilation of three essays and a Eucharistic homily from the Seventh General Meeting and Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, which took place on April 4-6, 2008 at Oakham School, the boarding school that Merton attended in his adolescence. *The Voice of the Stranger* is only 58 pages and saddle-stitched, making it feel more like an issue of a journal than a book. I will, therefore, use the term “booklet” to describe it. As the title suggests, its central theme is that of “the stranger.” Each of the three authors addresses that general theme in a radically different way. There are, however, unifying threads. Each author challenges stereotypical ideas about who is and is not a “stranger,” in ways that allow Merton to speak to situations that deeply haunt the world today.

James Conner, OCSO, is the author of the first essay, entitled “The Voice of the Stranger: A Manifesto for the 21st Century.” The goal of this manifesto, in Conner’s mind, is unity. Conner begins his homiletic essay by stating the obvious: we live in a polarized world. Humanity is sharply divided, be it from political affiliations, social status, or religious confession. This is just as true in the twenty-first century as it was in Merton’s lifetime. As Conner (through Merton) so poignantly clarifies, fear is often at the root of the “us and them” dichotomies that determine the stranger. Understanding and overcoming our fear of the stranger (through dialogue and communication) is perhaps Merton’s great call to the twenty-first century. Merton internalized this fear – embracing the stranger, seeing Christ in and among all people. In a passage that summarizes Merton’s ministry, Conner argues, “The whole mission of Jesus Christ was to reestablish that unity in God and in one another which was our original creation” (3). Conner sees the Eucharist as the springboard from which Christians embark on this business of unity. In concluding, Conner argues that Diarmuid O’Murchu’s book *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* (Crossroad, 2004) offers a helpful metaphor. By recognizing the interconnectivity of physical existence, one can (and should) see a parallel for Christian life – highlighting the “oneness” of humanity in spite of fear and differences. I appreciated Conner’s perceptive indictment of relational divisions, and his reading of Merton was fair and balanced. Conner aptly reminds us that if anyone embodied the call to overcome the barriers of “us and them,” surely it was Merton. None of Conner’s theses, however, addresses uniquely twenty-first-century problems, and his treatment of the issue of relating to the

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stranger raised questions he did not address: how does one discern the voice of God within the stranger? How do we define this “unity” and “inclusion” in a world of religious pluralism – and maintain confessional integrity?

In the second essay, entitled “Brothers in Prayer and Worship: The Merton/Aziz Correspondence, An Islamic-Christian Dialogue,” Bonnie Thurston changes the course of the volume to address interreligious dialogue. Thurston generally introduces the history and content of the fraternal correspondence between Merton and Abdul Aziz (34 letters, ranging from November 1960 until April 1968). Louis Massignon suggested that Aziz contact Merton in order to learn about Christian mysticism; he flatteringly described Merton to Aziz “as *simurgh*, the king of soaring birds in Persian mythology” (22). Aziz was a Pakistani government worker and student of Sufi mysticism already familiar with Merton, having read *The Ascent to Truth* in 1952. The relationship was rich with spiritual insight: the two discussed spirituality, exchanged books, and prayed for one another. Of particular importance to Thurston’s essay were prayer, spiritual practices, the Islamic theology of *Tawhid* (which she terms “the oneness of God”), and the practice of *Khalwah* (“solitary retreat” in her words). Islam captivated Merton, and he frequently used Islamic language and imagery in his letters to Aziz. Thurston offers a succinct reminder of the importance of this correspondence by highlighting the work of several other scholars (most notably Sidney Griffith) who have developed the implications of the Merton-Aziz correspondence in more detail. Merton’s respectful interaction with Islam speaks forcefully to England and America in the twenty-first century, reminding us of the importance of appreciating Islam and interreligious dialogue. His humble relationship with Aziz reminds the Church that it is not God that determines who is and is not the stranger; rather, it is the one who is unwilling to listen to voices unlike his or her own. As I reflect on the correspondence, I am convinced I am the stranger – eavesdropping on a conversation between friends. It is a conversation to which I need to pay closer attention.

The third essay, “The Poet as Stranger,” is David Scott’s treatment of a theme that neither of the other authors developed in detail: Merton as stranger. To illustrate Merton’s “strangeness,” Scott discusses the influences on and content of Merton’s poetry (as well as its role in the formation of Merton’s faith). In the first half of the essay, Scott reflects on Merton’s interactions with the poetry of William Blake, illustrating the formative function of poetry by discussing Blake’s 1789 poem “The Little Black Boy.” Although Scott gives a lengthy explication of this poem (or at least Mark Van Doren’s reading of it), I remain somewhat skeptical that it is an appropriate metaphor for Merton’s redemptive approach to social issues in the twentieth century. In what I see as a progressive contrast to Blake, Scott shifts the focus to Merton’s “Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll” – which enforces Merton’s indicting solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement. In the second half of the essay, Merton’s brilliant poem “Elias – Variations on a Theme” serves as a metaphor for understanding Merton’s poetic and spiritual journey. Rooted in immediate and tangible things (Western tradition, woods at Gethsemani, etc.), Merton moves toward “unfamiliar territory” (social concern, Eastern traditions, Latin America, etc.). Scott then perceptively asks, “Does the love of and need for poetry make one strange?” “The Poet as Stranger” seems to be a transcript of Scott’s actual lecture manuscript. His style is, therefore, less formal than the other two writers – especially contrasted with Thurston’s more academic style – and occasional grammatical errors hinder its flow. While (I am sure) this poetic diction and lighter tone made for an engrossing

lecture, the printed version is somewhat disorienting – not to mention the abruptness of the essay’s ending. Despite the stylistic weaknesses of his essay, however, I appreciated Scott’s suggestive elucidation of the various ways in which Merton was a stranger to his world: he was an orphan, an intellectual, a poet, a monk, and a social activist. Scott’s exhilarating treatment of “Elias,” though, was the highlight of this essay.

The booklet concludes with a brief (two-page) Eucharistic homily by Jim Conner (for the third Sunday of Easter, Year A). Referencing St. Luke’s Emmaus narrative, and a rich passage from Pope Benedict XVI, Conner asks if we are willing to recognize Christ in the strangers within our world. Many of the themes of his essay (a united humanity, Eucharist as service to the stranger, etc.) are present. This homily is a call to ministry, love, and reconciliation; it is a beautiful conclusion to the volume.

My only critique of the booklet: two of the three contributors (Conner and Thurston) are American. I would have benefitted from a more European reading of Merton in this volume, given that the British cousin of the ITMS published it. Other than the inconvenience of endnotes (I seem to be the only person who prefers footnotes), the booklet was informative and engaging. Reading *The Voice of the Stranger* left me wishing I had attended the conference. Or more specifically, I longed for the opportunity for post-lecture dialogue with the speakers, Merton enthusiasts, and attendees. Perhaps this is because the best ideas come about in community – sometimes even with strangers.

To obtain a copy of *The Voice of the Stranger*, simply complete and submit the order form at [www.thomasmertonsociety.org/voice.htm](http://www.thomasmertonsociety.org/voice.htm) (there are order forms for delivery to both the United States and the United Kingdom).