The Poisoned Arrow and the Koan of Job

Review of
Thomas Merton – Evil and Why We Suffer:
From Purified Soul Theodicy to Zen
By David E. Orberson
Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018
xiv + 127 pages / $19.00 paper

Reviewed by **Joseph Q. Raab**

Just when you think Thomas Merton has been approached from every angle, considered under every aspect, mined for every precious metal, a new book appears and Merton is rendered fresh and newly fascinating. David Orberson's *Thomas Merton – Evil and Why We Suffer: From Purified Soul Theodicy to Zen* explores Merton's spiritual and intellectual journey through the lens of Merton's own suffering, his thinking about suffering and about the problem of evil more broadly. Rather than describe a substantive developmental evolution in Merton's theodicy, Orberson exposes Merton's gradual abandonment of it. The study reveals a man struggling with questions he can't sufficiently answer – until he's finally exhausted and somehow at peace with the mystery.

Near the middle of his book Orberson references a seemingly off-hand note Merton jotted in his journal on September 10, 1957: "No easy generalizations about Job and Zen. Job is a big koan. So is everything else" (68). Since Orberson's treatise takes a chronological approach to Merton's theodicy, this late fifties comment doesn't serve to furnish an organizing idea for the book but for this review it shall.

The abhorrence of useless questions in Zen tradition is legendary, from the Master Ummon answering questioning pupils by whacking them over the head with a whisk broom, all the way back to the Buddha himself preaching the parable of the Poisoned Arrow. The Buddha called to his disciples:

> Come and live with me the holy life! If anyone says "I will not lead the holy life until the Blessed One answers my questions" he will fail to live the holy life and he will die without his questions answered. If a man is struck by a poisoned arrow does he refuse the surgeon's assistance until he can have his questions answered? Does he demand to know who shot the arrow, whether a warrior or a merchant? Does he demand to know the motive, the reason why? [This rendition of the parable is adapted from Walpola Rahula's classic *What the Buddha Taught*.]

Joseph Q. Raab is professor of Religious Studies and Theology at Siena Heights University in Adrian, MI and also lectures occasionally in systematic theology for the Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. He did his graduate studies at the Toronto School of Theology, where he earned an S.T.L (Regis) and a Ph.D. (St. Michael's), with a dissertation on Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki. He has served as co-editor of *The Merton Annual* since 2012.

In the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhist tradition, a koan is a mental puzzle that functions to exhaust discursive reason, induce humility and open the mind to mystery! The koan is a question designed to help the pupil confront and accept human limitations in the face of transcendent mystery. But the questions alone are not enough – it is the exchange between master and pupil that generates the pupil's epiphany.

Merton always appreciated God's response to Job as a comeuppance before the transcendent mystery – a call to humility and acceptance when answers elude – but appreciation is one thing and appropriation is another. Orberson recalls that in the fall of 1949 Merton was reading the Book of Job and recording in his journal how his perspective on the story had changed since he had read it in depth eight years prior (see 65-66). Merton suggests that in 1941 he was sympathizing with the comforters of Job – appreciating the approaches they offered, but by 1949 he was coming to appreciate that the Book of Job "does not solve the problem of suffering, in the abstract" and that we can learn more from the Divine rebuke than we can from Job's friends. This 1949 meditation foreshadows Merton's later internalization and appropriation of the wisdom of Job and his surrendering of the desire to have a definitive answer. This is the fascinating story that Orberson tells by closely attending to Merton's diaries, letters, poetry, books and essays.

The first chapter of *Thomas Merton – Evil and Why We Suffer* (1-29) is a biographical sketch that concretely illustrates how Merton's life exemplifies the Buddha's realization of *dukkha*, that all of life is imbued with inescapable suffering. Everyone is a Job – everyone is shot with a poisoned arrow! Though there is no new information here for those familiar with Merton's biography, the retelling is a useful reminder that it was replete with pain, loss and emotional trauma from his earliest years onward.

In the second chapter (30-51), Orberson surveys a variety of responses to the problem of evil and the search for an answer to why we suffer. In helpful pithy summaries the author describes models of free-will theodicy, soul-making theodicy, process theodicy and cruciform theodicy, highlighting the distinctive features of each and acknowledging the inability of each to fully satisfy all our questions or to console us in our pain. After surveying the Christian positions he presents a brief account of "Evil and Suffering in Zen" (46-50). At the end of the chapter the author introduces the question of Merton's particular brand of theodicy which he then examines in depth in the following two chapters.

Chapter three (52-77) looks at what Merton wrote from 1938 to 1963 relative to theodicy and breaks that span further into two periods: one from 1938 through 1949 (59-66) and another from 1950 to 1963 (66-76). The reason for the break has more to do with Merton's focus than with any substantive change in thinking. Whenever Merton offers reasons why God permits or causes suffering he does so solidly within the frame of soul-making and soul-purifying theodicy – which is to say that he presents it as potentially formative, purgative, restorative and redemptive. Orberson convincingly shows that what he terms "purified soul theodicy" is Merton's basic position, even though at times Merton writes in the vein of cruciform theodicy – emphasizing God's solidarity with us in our suffering, revealed most strikingly in Christ crucified. Orberson notes that in the 1950-1963 period Merton wrote more directly about the problems of war, nuclear arms and the holocaust, and this meant a sharper focus on the problem of evil (see 66).

This second phase reveals Merton's increasing unease over offering reasons and justifications for suffering and God's allowance of cruelty. This section highlights a letter Merton wrote to the

Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz where he openly wonders if belief in a providential God can be sustained in the shadow of the Shoah (see 69-70). Here the reader begins to see Merton's confidence in any kind of theodicy wane. Merton is less and less comfortable attempting to ferret out "reasons" – even though he continues to do so. Orberson pulls from a fascinating classroom exchange that Merton had with a novice who tried to resolve the problem by drawing a quick and tidy distinction between God willing the suffering of innocents versus God permitting such suffering, but Merton pushes back as if the student's response is just too easy (see 72-73). It appears, however, that in spite all of his unease Merton cannot avoid some pastoral duty to act as a comforter of Job; the most difficult and awkward material Orberson explores in this section is a letter Merton wrote to Jacqueline Kennedy after her husband had been assassinated. Unable to leave God talk out of it, Merton is bound to affirm – in some sense – that God willed the bullet to strike its mark (see 74-75).

The fourth chapter (78-114) explores the last four years of Merton's life and shows how his reading of Albert Camus' *The Plague* and his more intensive study of Zen led him not to a more refined or developed theodicy but to abandon the task more fully, to be more comfortable not knowing, to stop craving for an answer. Orberson modestly, and in my view correctly, argues that Zen's influence did not lead Merton to surrender his belief in the just and loving God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but to accept that "the intellect is ultimately lacking in providing the needed insights into life's ultimate questions" (114). Zen's radical iconoclasm toward theories and ideas functioned for Merton in a way similar to what God's rebuke did for Job. For decades Merton sympathized with the friends of Job, especially Eliphaz who tries to comfort, and Elihu who defends God's justice. Yet Orberson presents Merton as one who near the end of his life surrenders the role of explainer and defender and instead says along with Job: "I have uttered things I did not understand . . . but now I see . . . and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:3-6).

While Oberson's book is not meant to be a critical comparison of Christian and Buddhist thought regarding the nature of evil and the value of suffering, I was nonetheless hoping for a bit more comparative analysis. The author does draw a few comparisons between what some Buddhists have to say about the karmic nature of suffering, its potential value as a teacher leading one to moksha, and these seem consonant with Merton's appreciation of the formative and purgative potential of suffering (see 47-49). He also notes that Zen does not really have a "theodicy" since the frame of the traditional theistic problem of evil does not square with the framing of the problem in Buddhism (see 50). But after chapter two these threads get little attention and potentially rich comparisons and contrasts are left undeveloped. Also, a further revision would have caught some typographical errors and freed the text from the vestiges of a dissertation.

These criticisms are minor, however, compared to the significant value of this little book, and I recommend it highly. The whole point of a koan is that the question can't be simply suppressed, dismissed or avoided. Without the struggle there is no epiphany. Orberson has made a welcome contribution to the field of Merton studies by plunging into a most difficult and pressing question – one that can unveil the horizon of mystery, where silence becomes revelatory of the Real.