

Seeds of Hope in This Mad Place

Review of
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When participants at the June 2019 ITMS General Meeting gathered on the campus of Santa Clara University to reflect on the conference, we were unaware of what the year 2020 would behold. With the onset of Covid-19, one could argue that now, more than ever, we are called to reflect on our conference theme, “O Peace, Bless This Mad Place.” Volume 32 of *The Merton Annual*, edited by Deborah Pope Kehoe and Joseph Quinn Raab, highlights many of the provocative papers and workshops presented at the 2019 conference. Typical of *The Merton Annual*, this volume contains material penned by Merton himself as well as essays that challenge us to respond as faithful witnesses in our world today. This faithful witness takes many shapes, from letters to poetry, from stories to music – all research grounded in Merton’s wisdom. In addition, for the third volume in a row, there are contributions that focus directly on Merton’s voice within the civil rights movement, a subject matter that continues to need our attention. Also with tradition, this volume contains excellent reviews on many of the works published in 2018, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Merton’s death. Overall, this volume particularly speaks to the needs of our time, when in the midst of pandemic and unrest as a world, one is even more convinced that the spirit of Merton provides, as Raab notes in his introduction, “Finding Your Right Mind in This Mad Place” (7-10), “seeds of hope and peace” in all the madness (7).

This volume contains two of the keynote presentations from the conference, the first, “Direct Transmission of Faith” by Rose Marie Berger (78-92). Most people who attended the 2019 conference will remember her motto “keep Merton weird” and this theme persists in her written contribution; however, the greater take-away is honoring the value of Merton’s words as a direct transmission of faith. Another highlight of her contribution is the land acknowledgement statement at the beginning of her paper. This statement “recognizes and respects Indigenous Peoples as traditional stewards of this land where we are meeting . . . and the enduring relationship they continue to have with their traditional territories” (79). Especially given that our last two conferences have taken place on native land – the Seneca Nation (St. Bonaventure University) and the Ohlone nation (Santa Clara University) – Berger reminds us that we do well to continue to be aware of the sacred lands where we meet to discuss Merton. Berger, in recalling

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for us Merton's transmission of faith and of the native land we stand on, encourages us to seek out our own lineages of faith and to acknowledge sacred space in our lives.

A particular joy in this volume is the paper by Robert Ellsberg entitled “The Gate of Heaven Is Everywhere: The Faith Journey of Thomas Merton” (93-113), which highlights three epiphany experiences of Merton. Many familiar with Merton will know these experiences well and Ellsberg brings in new wisdom to these epiphanies: “Each of these experiences puts him [Merton] in the presence of a kind of ultimate reality, an experience of underlying unity, wholeness or holiness . . . but they also represent a widening spiral of consciousness, from the Church, to the secular city, to the cosmos itself, that signals a new chapter for spiritual journey” (109). Ellsberg also shares his own thoughts on the canonization of Merton, as discussed with a group of high school students. He concludes: “But his [Merton’s] greatest desire was always to be a man on the margins – in solidarity with all those others on the margins. . . . I’m not entirely sure his particular model of faithfulness is best served by being given an imprimatur” (111). Ellsberg’s insights reaffirm a something that need not be canonized: Merton’s ever-widening understanding of holiness is a concept we all must be open to in our own lives.

Following Berger and Ellsberg, the next essays deal specifically with the Merton and the civil rights movement. These essays present a challenging message, especially as the United States once again comes face to face with pointless murders of African Americans like George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery in the spring of 2020. Paul Dekar’s essay “God’s Messenger: Thomas Merton on Racial Justice” (137-54) provides a wide view of Merton’s communications in the movement, highlighting specifically his relationships with Fr. August Thompson, Robert Lawrence Williams and James Baldwin. Dekar observes that these are the voices that must be lifted up as we continue to fight the “profound spiritual crisis” of racism in our country (153). Gregory Hillis takes a more focused view, specifically on the letters between Fr. August Thompson and Thomas Merton in his essay “Letters to a Black Catholic Priest: Thomas Merton, Fr. August Thompson and the Civil Rights Movement” (114-36). A delightful recounting of a story unknown to most, Hillis provides the reader with the voices of a movement that were, most likely, previously unheard. A poignant moment comes at the end of this essay, shortly before Fr. Thompson died, as Hillis weaves a eulogy-like description of his first and last encounter with Fr. Thompson. Both of these essays continue the project to explore the conversations between Merton and other civil rights leaders. Dekar brings forth voices such as Malcom X, Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King Jr. and Hillis presents the reader with a call to action: “we would do well to delve more deeply into Merton’s writing on race . . . but also to keep alive the heroic witness of women and men like Fr. August Thompson” (135).

Liam Lynch’s contribution, “Contemplative Cosmopolitanism: Thomas Merton’s Response to Xenophobia” (170-82) provides the reader with another approach to understanding tragedy and xenophobia. Lynch’s essay explores Merton’s corrective to fear of difference and outsiders, found in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. This essay pairs well with the two contributions from Hillis and Dekar, providing us not only with Merton’s wisdom on what divides us, but a possible path to peace and solidarity through the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

Echoing some themes from previous articles, this volume continues with an exploration by Michael Plekon of the Eucharist in the contexts of the 1964 Gethsemani Peacemakers Retreat, “Communion and Engagement: Merton, Berrigan and the Eucharist in Peacemaking and Protest”

(155-69). Using Gordon Oyer's *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* as a guide, Plekon artfully examines the Peacemakers Retreat in light of a liturgy from the word to the table. Of particular interest is innate connection of the liturgy to social engagement: "liturgy was the life of the world, not just a ritual 'blessing' of political activism" (168). Through the retreat talks and the rituals celebrated, "These great disciples were rooted in the Eucharist, in prayer and in communion with Christ and each other" for the work of social justice (169).

Patrick O'Connell makes two contributions to this volume – the first, the complete correspondence of Merton with Br. Patrick's Hart (11-77). Most of Merton's letters to Hart had previously been published, but for the first time, Br. Patrick's letters also appear in print, expertly annotated, organized and ordered. A celebration of not only the relationship of Merton and Br. Patrick, this contribution is a fitting tribute, as we have just passed the one-year mark of his death in February of 2019. O'Connell remarks, "This collection of letters testifies to the warmth of a relationship that flourished during these years together and apart, and that really came to its conclusion (or rather moved to another dimension) not with Merton's death but only with that of Patrick himself" (12). In addition, O'Connell's "Thomas Merton and the 'Edenic Office of the Poet': Three Poems from *The Tears of the Blind Lions*" (183-204) examines poems on the theme of the return to paradise from what was originally planned as a Christmas collection of poems, but ends up being quite often dark in tone. O'Connell sets the context for this collection well, in a way that the reader can appreciate Merton's own frame of reference when writing.

Finally, Christopher Pramuk includes his own guided meditation, a "delightful darkside" of sorts by pairing two of his spiritual influencers: Pink Floyd and Merton. "Merton and the Dark Side of the Moon: Points for Meditation and Deep Listening inside a Darkened Space" (205-17) is best enjoyed when performed and it is advantageous to have the text and performance suggestions included in this volume. If you had the privilege of being in the room for this creative meditative journey, this written guide will provide you with fond memories and opportunities for further reflection.

As usual, this volume contains the 2018 bibliographic review of works written about Merton (218-38). Marking the fiftieth anniversary of Merton's death, Deborah Pope Kehoe gracefully organizes a wide-ranging genre of books, essays and other works around the concept of time: Merton Past and Merton Eternally Present. She highlights some key contributions to the Merton world in the past year, while also drawing one's attention to the numerous reviews (11 in all) at the conclusion of this volume (239-91). She also issues her own call to action at the conclusion of her review: "May we continue to seek the infinite truth of his eternal mind. . . . May we also continue to increase the resources that bear his name . . . may the channeling of his timeless voice persists fifty years beyond" (238).

Throughout this volume, the theme of listening constantly beckons us to "bless this mad place." By listening for God's voice in our epiphany experiences, listening for those voices of the civil rights movement, listening for the voices of the outsider, of the letter writer, of the musician, we can hear Merton's call to peace and holiness resounding throughout time. Merton is indeed eternally present! What we have to discover by attuning our ears and our lives is Merton's timeless message: in a world full of sickness, pain and division, there is a possibility of a deep, unifying peace and holiness. We only have to listen and faithfully respond.