

Author's Response

In February of 1994 at the University of Chicago's Thomas Merton Symposium, David Tracy surmised that it was now time for theologians to give a "second reception" to the works of Thomas Merton. I find this an apt description of my own effort in *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*. Merton's work has been stereotyped in American Catholic culture. His public image has largely revolved around his autobiography, an early 1940s conversion story and a publishing phenomenon of the post-World War II era. Merton became synonymous with the *persona* of the monk who fled the world for a monastic island of solitude where he let us eavesdrop on his introspective spiritual struggles. Merton studies became an industry preoccupied with this gifted, literate monk as an object of curiosity. But Thomas Merton renegotiated his relationship with himself, with God, and with the world. Theologians have subsequently attended to his writings about war and peacemaking, and they have heralded him as a pioneer in interreligious dialogue with Asian spiritual traditions. However, as a contemplative, monk, poet, and broader social critic, Merton is only just beginning to gain a critical reception from the American theological community.

The reviewers have accurately perceived that I undertook my study of Merton for two major reasons: (1) to situate Merton's sometimes daring reformulations of the Catholic Christian tradition within the context of the developments and changing methods in theology and spirituality studies since Vatican Council II and Merton's death; and (2) to integrate and to discover the underlying sources and influences on Merton's diverse genres and themes, which do not themselves present a system but which, when interpreted systematically, yield an uncanny focus and contemporary insight on what the tradition names as Christ's *kenosis*.

Patrick Eastman's comment on Bernard of Clairvaux's *De diligendo Deo* underscores the ultimate concern of monastic culture with living a life immersed in the mystery of Christ. Christology naturally occupied the center of attention in the monastic reforms of the Cistercian tradition as reflected in the writings of its "golden age," from 1098 to 1250. Bernard McGinn has dubbed this "the Cistercian miracle," because the changes it effected, particularly the emphasis upon experience, awakened Western Christianity to genuine spirituality. Thomas Mer-

ton retrieved these dormant sources from beneath the layers of Trappist austerity that had buried his own authentic monastic tradition since De Rancé's reforms of the late seventeenth century.

What Eastman alertly perceives is the importance of method in *Ace of Freedoms*. Where and how does the theologian or the theological critic of imaginative literature turn for the sources of Christology? Diana Culbertson strengthens the case for my including Merton's poetry and prose poems (as well as journals, letters, reading notes, and reviews) as sources for Christology. She identifies the tradition from Boccaccio to Paul Ricoeur as evolving and compelling evidence that the method of turning to poetry "as a strategy for theologizing needs no valiant defense." In the same way, the fifty years since the Catholic Church's encyclical on biblical scholarship, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, have yielded a myriad of systematic biblical theologies that draw upon and interpret a wide spectrum of literary genres, including an abundance of Hebrew and Greek poetry in the sacred texts.

I take Culbertson's judgment that "[t]o reflect on Merton's Christology, using his poetry as source, has further obstacles: his corpus is unsystematic . . . and his modernist style is ironic, parodic, and more dissonant than what we customarily look for in 'religious poetry'" as a healthy compliment. In *Ace of Freedoms* I have addressed these formidable and challenging "obstacles" and followed the path of Merton's Christ of *kenosis* through his canon, which sometimes looks like a labyrinth. Nathan Scott and Robert Detweiler have been among those championing such methods for a theological criticism of imaginative literature. Scott traces his own theoretical roots to Paul Tillich, whose axiom "Religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion" proves congenial to Merton's efforts as monk and poet. Ricoeur's work argues this thesis even more convincingly and affords new vectors for such attention to an author's metapoetic as a religious text that invites theological reflection.

On the matter of Culbertson's complimenting my consistently integrating Merton's prose and poetry, I would offer a reminiscence. The method of integrating Merton's various genres (and voices) in *Ace of Freedoms* was clarified during a conversation over morning coffee at Michael Mott's home in Bowling Green, Ohio. We were discussing the Pasternak connection and Merton's enthusiasm for the Georgian poet's work. Pasternak, oppressed by Soviet politics, had evoked an extraordinary response from the monk. It was in the course of examin-

ing this that Mott, Merton's biographer, argued that the poems at the conclusion of *Doctor Zhivago* were integral to the work, and that a poet like Merton had read them in that way. In this sense, the poems were the hermeneutical key to his prose. In Mott's words, the two—prose and poetry—stood side by side, like panels of a diptych, hinged and matching parts. To separate them would render either piece unintelligible.

In interpreting Merton's antipoetry I have, as Culbertson notes, argued that the antipoet was a "constructive identity" for Merton, with "irony as the literary analogue of kenosis." John Howard Griffin once remarked that *The Geography of Lograire* drew upon the "whole culture of Thomas Merton." In that sense such an imaginative effort challenges a reader like none of his other works. I think of Merton giving voice to a cultural transition like the one announced in T. S. Eliot's highly annotated *The Waste Land*. We will only appreciate the antipoetry as we recover Merton's sense of our world as a "post-Christian" world. Employing that term, he argued that we have abdicated our human freedom, and only as a countercultural "diaspora" Church will we stop relying upon structures and a false sense of our selves and recover our inner spiritual freedom.

Donald Goergen also strikes a chord in harmony with David Tracy's invitation to a "second reception" of Merton when he identifies as a strength of *Ace of Freedoms* my "ability to see spirituality as a matrix or source for theology." Again, the experiential foundations of the Cistercian tradition inform Merton, whose spirituality indeed nourishes heart and head. As for method, Goergen also endorses the turn to poetry as a theological source—as well as my "mining" what might be thought of as the other "nontheological" sources in Merton's canon.

Goergen, however, judges that I overstate when interpreting Merton. He asks if I have overstated a "discontinuity" between the early and later Merton. Anthony Padavano has described the Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain* as a "Catholic bigot" when comparing him to the later, exploratory spiritual master in dialogue with Buddhist monks. Merton's own self-evaluation, which I have taken from a contrite entry in his notebooks (7), gives evidence of his conversion from a "gnostic" and "manichean" view of the world to a more optimistic and constructive sense of his own "place in the world." I wonder if Goergen's critique is not of Merton himself rather than of my interpretation? As I point out in my introduction (2), Merton's "proclivity to

exaggerate" rivaled his habitual use of irony. On the point of the discontinuity between the early and later Merton, however, I find every evidence of radical and ongoing intellectual, moral, and even religious conversion voiced in autobiographical passages in various genres of his work.

Goergen concludes by recommending *Ace of Freedoms* "for a fuller and deeper knowledge of [Merton's] Christology." Yet earlier he had judged that Merton has "a kenotic image of Christ" rather than an explicitly kenotic Christology. Does Goergen do justice to the consistently kenotic patterns and echoes I identify throughout the book when analyzing Merton's Christological language and images? The review by Jean-Marc Laporte suggests an alternative reading from Goergen's. He identifies *kenosis* as an architectonic theological theme "that surfaces at many strategic points in the writings of Thomas Merton." And he suggests that Merton himself contributes to theological method with the interrelation of his personal spiritual quest and the authentic theology emerging from his work. Once again, Tracy's call for a "second reception" of Merton gains an endorsement.

As far as the method of *Ace of Freedoms*, Laporte perceives well the distinction I make in Merton's shift from an exclusively "descending Christology" to a more complete Christology that embraces "both ascending and descending movements." What he even more alertly picks up is the connection between Merton's theology of the "true self" involving a "disruptive" invitation to let go of the distortions and fixations with the "false self"—a central emphasis in the Philippians 2:5-11 text on *kenosis*, which presents Christ and Adam in counterpoint. It yields the very kenotic autobiographical pattern of Merton's own spiritual quest.

Laporte's reflection on the suffering servant community as the subject of the *kenosis* affords a fine connection to Merton's antipoetry and prose of the final years. The suggestion of "kenotic dialogue" as a radical recovery of the potential for community across inherited boundaries clarifies the effort I have undertaken in my study of Merton's Christology and his ever-expanding Catholicism. Michael Mott has written on this *parrhesia*, or prophetic speech, as essential for understanding Merton's poetry and his prose. Laporte rightly identifies Jesus as the one who "is able to create the space in which people can come to life-shaping commitments in an atmosphere of trust and freedom"—thus Christ as the "ace of freedoms."

There is an important connection between Merton's mature monastic identity, with his becoming less concerned with intrainstitutional issues, and his embrace of the world with its disruptive moments and discontinuities. Laporte explores such a development in Richard of St. Victor's stages in his *Four Grades of Violent Love*. The fourth and final shift in Richard's thought, from the need to be "correct" (read "orthodox") to the need to be "compassionate," entails a liberating conversion experience. Such was the transition for Merton. Laporte perceives Merton's unrelenting effort to stimulate us in a contemplative exploration of this self-emptying, offering an incipient theology of *kenosis*. He rightly names the first *kenosis* in Merton's spirituality as the conversion from the false to the true self. The second *kenosis*, compassion, indeed for Merton "led to the risking of that inner self as it found new enfleshment in a complex and ambiguous world."

Diana Culbertson has juxtaposed a pair of images to question whether Merton's antipoetry succeeds or not: is it "clutter" or a "mosaic"? Perhaps we are still standing too close to Merton and the cultural divide of the late 1960s to discern the figure or pattern in what appears to be simply the "clutter" of a complex and ambiguous world. But I wonder if Merton-the-poet's own description of each of his two collections of antipoetry as a "mosaic" does not offer a further kenotic Christological insight for a Church in turmoil but also in renewal. Merton's preference for the apophatic way of "knowing by unknowing," taking the "dark path," is vividly mirrored in the symbols of the Easter Vigil. How appropriate it is that the Church gathers in inky darkness to mark the patient waiting for Christ our Light. From the yawning void of the tomb we emerge into the light of the paschal fire. The paschal candle bears this light and broadcasts it throughout the assembly in the form of tapers held before the diverse faces of humanity. The tapers create a corona of light and color surrounding each face. When seen from this perspective, the gathered body of Christians itself forms a mosaic of light and color, each face being illuminated like the mosaic's single tiles bounded by dark lines. And so the Church becomes the icon of Christ, who is the icon of God. The living body, which has experienced abandonment and oppression, now manifests this hidden Christ through new Easter faith.

I want to express my gratitude to Patrick Eastman, Diana Culbertson, Donald Goergen, and Jean-Marc Laporte for their constructive discourse concerning the interpretations of Merton's Christology

and poetry that I have developed in *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*. This review-symposium is a genuine example of the scholars' "kenotic dialogue" which Laporte has described as itself a deepening of community.

It is a joy to think that the doctrine of Christ's *kenosis* once again plays a central role in our collective enterprise as theologians and persons of faith. Thomas Merton has articulated this mystery in the images and metaphors of his prose and poetry. The real purpose of our Christian lives finds the energy and freedom Merton proclaims when we are united under the power of the Spirit to the God of Jesus Christ, and when we pour out our lives in healing love and compassionate service.

George Kilcourse