

Introduction: The Religious Ethic at the Heart of Merton's Spirituality

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The year 1998 marks a striking nexus of Merton anniversaries: 1968, the thirtieth anniversary of Merton's death; 1958, the fortieth anniversary of Merton's revelatory experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville; 1948, the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*; and 1938, Merton's entering the Roman Catholic Church at Corpus Christi Parish near Columbia University. Articles in this volume of *The Merton Annual* touch upon dimensions of each of these events, and more.

Shortly before going to press, a copy of a new volume about Merton arrived and once again reminded me of his complex, even paradoxical, personality. Robert Inchausti's *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*¹ wrestles creatively with each of the defining events that marks the anniversaries just noted. Inchausti's work is different from the spate of new 'introductions' to Merton that merely re-package familiar, encyclopedic data. Where others risk abbreviation and truncation (and avoid the challenge of *interpreting* Merton for a new generation of readers), this Professor of English at California Polytechnic State University ventures a provocative new thesis: 'Thomas Merton was an apostle, not a genius.'²

Borrowing these categories from Søren Kierkegaard's work, Inchausti deftly situates Merton within a broader intellectual and cultural context. He sees Merton in a paradoxical relationship with the human enterprise, an 'absolute dissident and metaphysical rebel' who drowns falsity and limitations 'in the light of a higher truth'.³ In the

1. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998.

2. Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 1.

3. Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 1.

process, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* unfolds an important new appraisal of Merton's dialogue with and compassion for the world. Reviewers will, no doubt, soon debate the merits and flaws of Inchausti's contribution to Merton studies. Is it fair to say (as Inchausti does) that Merton 'was not particularly innovative as a theorist' or not even 'original' in his writings?⁴ Others who lean toward the revisionist reading of Merton's spirituality as lay-centered, or who prefer to see him surrendering (even abdicating) his monastic identity, will quarrel with Inchausti's conclusion: 'Thomas Merton was no mere theorist of the sacred but a God-intoxicated man, a practicing contemplative, who spent his life within a physically demanding and spiritually rigorous religious order.'⁵

On 17 March 1998 The Thomas Merton Center Foundation collaborated with The Kentucky Historical Society to erect a bronze historical marker at the corner of Fourth and Muhammed Ali Streets in Louisville. Forty years earlier on this very corner—then known as Fourth and Walnut Streets—the monk had emerged from a doctor's appointment in the Starks Building. Merton's own description of the event (reworking the original journal entry in light of his reading Thomas Traherne's *Centuries* some five years later, as Michael Mott has meticulously reconstructed this text⁶) in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*⁷ is his most well-known epiphany and new opening to the world he had solemnly rejected in 1941. Inchausti begins his eighth chapter, 'Second Calling', with this account of the experience and offers a trenchant analysis of Merton's disowning '[t]he whole illusion of a separate holy existence' and his gratitude 'that I am like other men, that I am only a man among others'.

Here Merton exposes the spiritual elitism at the heart of his early books and aphorisms. Monks are not superior to the ordinary person, but through a life devoted to prayer and reflection they can become supremely common, connected, more truly themselves than those of us caught up in worldly illusions dare allow ourselves to be. And, by so doing, through humility, they can come to know others more profoundly than those others know themselves. This does not make monks superior to the average person; only less distracted, and, therefore more real.⁸

4. Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 142.

5. Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 142.

6. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

7. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966.

8. Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, p. 72.

Inchausti then develops what I would term Merton's 'religious ethic' in subsequent chapters of the book.

It is no mere coincidence that I have focused upon *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* to introduce this eleventh volume of *The Merton Annual*. Four of our authors as well as the subject of this year's interview were personal friends of Merton, and therefore are especially capable to assess the distinctly religious ethic at the heart of his spirituality. The remaining four authors in this year's *Annual* pursue themes that track Merton's development along the same continuum as Robert Inchausti's *Merton-as-the-Apostle, or Radical*, who searches for an antidote to the world's toxins.

Thomas Merton's 'The Black Sheep', introduced and edited by Paul Pearson continues *The Merton Annual's* practice of offering readers unpublished Merton material. Donald Allchin's 'Our Lives, a Powerful Pentecost: Merton's Meeting with Russian Christianity', originated as the lecture presented by Merton's Anglican friend from Wales at the dedication of the new Thomas Merton Center in the W.L. Lyons Brown Library at Bellarmine College. It offers readers a sequel to Allchin's *TMA* 5 essay ('The Worship of the Whole Creation: Merton & the Eastern Fathers', *TMA* 5 [1992], pp. 189-204) by examining his debt to the *diaspora* Russian theologians; this ecumenical opening to the Eastern Church coincided with his new openness following the 1958 'vision' at Fourth and Walnut (simultaneous with Merton's correspondence with the Russian novelist Boris Pasternak).

Another Merton friend, peace- and social-activist Daniel Berrigan, SJ, offers a unique reflection on both his monk-friend and their mutual friend, Dorothy Day, in 'What, Then, Must We Do?', the keynote for Rivier College's March 1998 symposium. Few are as qualified as Berrigan to assess Merton's religious ethic or his role in America's turmoil during the 1960s. That Berrigan chooses poetry⁹ to communicate some of this insight resonates well with Merton's own proclivity for that genre.

James W. Douglass met Thomas Merton as a young man and remained an important contact for him with The Fellowship of Reconciliation. His essay, 'Compassion and the Unspeakable' was presented as a keynote address at the International Thomas Merton Society General Meeting at Spring Hill College in June 1997. Revised

9. For Berrigan's most recent publication, see *And the Risen Bread: Selected Poems, 1957-97* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998).

for *TMA*, it includes reference to Merton's CIA files and raises questions that disturb, much like Merton's own essays in *Faith and Violence*.

E. Glenn Hinson met Merton as a professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. "'Thomas Merton, my Brother": The Impact of Thomas Merton on my Life and Thought' was a plenary address at the ITMS Spring Hill College meeting, reporting on another ecumenical initiative with Hinson's and his students' visits to the monastery.

William Reiser, SJ explores Merton's religious ethic by examining the redefinition of spirituality in terms of solidarity and compassion as expressions of contemporary Catholic social teaching in 'Solidarity and the Reshaping of Spirituality'. Christopher C. Burnham's 'Merton's *Ethos* in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: Toward a Rhetoric of Conversion' provides a sequel to his 'Out of the Shadows: Merton's Rhetoric of Revelation' (*TMA* 9 [1996], pp. 55-73) with a timely textual comparison of the early journals and the autobiography. Readers will find a compelling new argument for the publication of Merton's journals which Burnham contends present the conflicted 'true' or 'authentic' self (along with social conscience themes that would later re-emerge), distinct from the 'composed' or fabricated self which serves a different rhetorical purpose in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.

Ross Labrie's 'Merton and Time', presented at the ITMS Spring Hill College meeting, explores a dimension that Merton found to be a value in itself, an aspect of the goodness of the created world and its creator. He previously contributed 'Merton and the American Romantics' (*TMA* 9 [1996], pp. 34-54). Citing Merton's debt to Bergson, Maritain, Faulkner and Edwin Muir, as well as a variety of the monk's own texts replete with apocalyptic and eschatological themes, Labrie interprets Merton's sense of time vis-à-vis growth and transformation. Robert Faricy, SJ, offers a follow-up to 'Thomas Merton and Zen' (*TMA* 9 [1996], pp. 142-51) with 'Merton and Mysticism of the Mind', also presented at the ITMS meeting at Spring Hill College. He locates Merton in the intellectualist or apophatic tradition, the 'mysticism of the mind', distinct from the heart, or voluntarist, current of understanding Christian contemplation and non-Christian contemplation such as Zen. This is a particularly helpful distinction because he explains Merton's late attraction to Meister Eckhart.

This year's *TMA* interview, with Fr Chrysogonus Waddell, OCSO, "'Truly Seeking God ... in Christ": An Interview about Thomas Merton', offers a unique monastic voice. Readers will recognize his name from his contribution of 'Merton of Gethsemani and Bernard of Clairvaux' (*TMA* 5 [1992], pp. 95-132); and 'Merton and the Tiger Lily'

(*TMA* 2 [1989], pp. 95-132). For 18 years Fr Chrysogonus lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani with Thomas Merton. As a novice, an accomplished musicologist and liturgist, he brings a special perspective as a monastic confrère and friend of Merton. *Caveat*: his interpretation of various incidents and personalities recounted in this interview will conflict with others' interpretations. In the wake of the publication of seven volumes of Merton's journals, Fr Chrysogonus's observations about Merton's habits and temperament are an especially helpful contribution. Needless to say, some readers will find him provocative; but from such diverse readings emerges the complexity of Thomas Merton.

My co-editor, Victor A. Kramer, has prepared this year's bibliographic review of Mertoniana. With the publication of more volumes of the Merton journals, he has provided readers with a valuable reflective essay on both this genre and the correspondence. As primary editor of this year's *Annual*, it was my privilege to select both the titles and reviewers for the book reviews section.

Finally, let me welcome our new publisher, Sheffield Academic Press, England. Publisher Philip R. Davies has ably assisted us in a new venture with electronic transmission of computer files for *The Merton Annual*. This will allow us to expedite production and provide future volumes on a more timely schedule. If you are a member of The International Thomas Merton Society then you are the beneficiary of a significantly discounted subscription price for *The Merton Annual*. This collaborative arrangement signals a new level of cooperation between *TMA*, ITMS and the publisher. We hope that you encourage others to join the ITMS and to subscribe to *The Merton Annual* in this new series.