

## **Inertia, Idiosyncrasy and Incubation: The Range of Current Merton Studies**

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A glance at the serialized bibliography that concludes each issue of *The Merton Seasonal* occasions a revealing question: How much serious critical analysis of Merton's work is being published today? On the one hand, as of this writing the most recent two numbers of that useful quarterly medley *The Merton Seasonal* indicate a disturbing decline in serious Mertoniana. Close scrutiny reveals a virtual inertia in terms of genuinely new scholarly studies. In the Spring 2001 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*, brief newspaper articles and book reviews in magazines or journals comprise the overwhelming bulk of 'recent publications about Merton'. The Winter 2000 issue includes a master's thesis and DMin dissertation on Merton (evidence of research, yet highly tentative genres), but once again the one-to-three page newspaper items and brief book reviews dominate. Rare is the exploratory essay authored by a new voice from outside the familiar Merton circle. What would we do for the bulk of Merton studies without the cycle of articles from the English-Welsh *Thomas Merton Journal*, *The Merton Annual*, or the more abbreviated articles in *The Merton Seasonal*? From time to time one finds an essay about Merton in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* or *Cross Currents* and other scholarly journals on religion, but these are of varying quality and sometimes address highly specialized topics.

In the wake of the 1995-98 publication of Merton's multi-volume journals, it comes as no surprise that book reviews of the mountainous 2750+ pages of primary material have garnered disproportionate attention. Looking at the Fall 2000 issue of the *Seasonal*, 14 of 49 bibliographic entries (for 'Publications about Merton') are reviews of his journals; 15 other entries are reviews of either recent books about Merton or books of arguably slight relevance to Merton studies. Fifteen of

the 45 bibliographic entries (for 'Publications about Merton') in the Summer 2000 issue of the *Seasonal* are reviews of his journals; an additional 14 entries are reviews of either recent books about Merton or books sometimes of only tangential or marginal interest—the overwhelming number of such reviews being terse and ephemeral.

Until such a time as The Thomas Merton Center (or some other organization) provides a website with the complete and carefully categorized online bibliography, the time has come for more carefully arranged, separate categories in the *Seasonal's* bibliography. Not all 'Publications about Merton' are equivalent. We need at a minimum the types of categories that Patricia Burton constructs in her user-friendly index to volumes 1 to 25 of *The Merton Seasonal* (see below): 'Reviews: Merton's Books'; 'Reviews: Books About Merton'; 'Reviews: Books with a Chapter about Merton'; 'Reviews: Books with Brief Mention of Merton', etc.

The same can be said for separate categories of newspaper articles and reviews in popular magazines as distinct from scholarly essays and reviews. To mingle these indiscriminately into a single category ('Publications about Merton') poorly serves readers because these are very different genres with very different purposes and audiences. Such distinctions in the *Seasonal* bibliography (or any other Merton bibliography) would dramatically call attention to how scarce is new, serious scholarly research on Merton's writing and thought. I share my co-editor Victor A. Kramer's lament of last year: Merton is 'far from becoming a significant internationally recognized figure who is generating substantial scholarly work... [H]e remains a fairly parochial figure.'<sup>1</sup> I evaluate the current state of Merton studies across a broad spectrum—from inertia through idiosyncrasy to a few hopeful signs of incubating new research.

The only *bona fide* new book on Merton in the year 2000 was Robert Jingen Gunn's *Journeys into Emptiness: Dōgen, Merton, Jung and the Quest for Transformation*.<sup>2</sup> Yet only one-third of this volume actually studies Thomas Merton. The title reveals that this is not a study of Merton alone, but parallel interpretations of: the thirteenth-century Japanese Zen Master, Dōgen, whose practice of meditation in *zazen* liberates the self and consciousness from self-imposed restrictions; Carl Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst who saw in religion the attempt of cultures to enable individuation, or the process by which the self

1. 'Connecting the Spiritual and the Cultural: Patterns Within Merton's Writing; 1999 Bibliographic Review', *The Merton Annual 13* (2000), pp. 144-64 (160).

2. New York: Paulist Press, 2000.

becomes actualized; and Merton, whose narcissistic wounds (especially delivered by his mother Ruth's perfectionism and critical distancing) led to lifelong efforts and extensive written reflections on liberation from the true self-false self dichotomy. In each of these paradigmatic spiritual journeys Gunn finds a confrontation with (and a living through) the powerful experience of 'emptiness' in order to open new vistas in spiritual experience, ultimately leading to union with God and all creation.

*Journeys into Emptiness* is the fifteenth volume in 'The Jung and Spirituality Series' under the editorship of Robert L. Moore. Each title strives to advance the Jung-Spirituality dialogue in terms of greater cooperation between psychology and spirituality. Moore describes the goal as moving us 'ahead in the formation of a postmodern spirituality, equal to the challenges of the twenty-first century' (p. x). Gunn remarks his intention in the book's preface: 'We want to see in what ways the experience of emptiness was for [Dögen, Merton, and Jung] not merely a passing hurdle to be overcome nor a mere theme of study, but a way of living, of being fully alive, productive and creative' (p. xi). This emphasis on the *experience* of emptiness (not merely the *concept*) pervades Gunn's study. He brings the strongest professional credentials thus far of any writer to the question of Merton's psychospiritual journey as he investigates the monk's autobiography and his quest for transcendence. Gunn is a psychotherapist in private practice in New York City; a faculty member at Union Theological Seminary, at the Blanton Peale Graduate Institute, at the Postgraduate Center for Mental Health, and at the Center for Spirituality and Psychology.

It is refreshing to find a male writer who is not intimidated by the *de facto* premise reigning in some Merton circles that only a woman can possibly do justice to the monk's psychospiritual development from a psychoanalytic point of view. Gunn works his way methodically and constructively through Merton's story. Along the way, he offers cogent and subtle analyses to discredit some of the popular overstatements and familiar interpretations that have been rehearsed by lesser lights in recent years. While I will conclude my review of *Journeys into Emptiness* by pointing out lacunae in Gunn's research about Merton, I can say unequivocally that this important book offers a creative and compelling interpretation of Merton's spirituality that should precipitate a lively and constructive new phase of interdisciplinary study of the monk.

Beginning with Merton's infancy, Gunn locates 'the seeds for identity confusion' (p. 85) leading to young Tom's earliest experiences of

emptiness. To wit: the early death of both his parents, his 'perpetual dislocation' throughout childhood (p. 87), and the narcissistic mother, Ruth's, baby book (*Tom's Book*) recording in 19 pages Tom's every early achievement, all of which resonate with Alice Miller's now classic psychoanalytic interpretation in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. Gunn emphasizes how Miller points out that it is not a matter of the absence of strong affection on Ruth's part—a fact omitted by most interpreters. Instead, the mother 'often loves her child as her self-object, passionately, but not in the way it needs to be loved... [W]hat is missing... is the framework within which the child could experience his feelings and his emotions.' Gunn judges that Ruth's habit of keeping the journal, *Tom's Book*, interfered with her directly relating to her son. He describes it as 'a distance—emotionally detached', being the opposite of what the infant Thomas Merton needed. He interprets this as 'a degree of schizoid detachment from personal relatedness' that transfers to her son, who learns to relate to the outside world and others primarily 'through his writing, as observer and reflector rather than participant' (p. 90).

As a result, Gunn sees the young Thomas Merton's adapting to a 'performance' mode as a false self dedicated to trying to live up to the expectations of Ruth, the observant, vigilant, perfectionistic, critical parent. He interprets this overriding of the boy's own inner experience and feelings as a lasting wound and division within his own self. Excerpts from *The Seven Storey Mountain* lend credibility to Gunn's compelling case. He proposes that Ruth's lack of 'mirroring' of feelings to help the child understand them leads to the young Merton's self-blaming emptiness and emotional distancing. Owen Merton is judged 'equally complicit' (p. 101) in the boy's resulting sense of distancing, unavailability, and abandonment. The irony is that for all the eavesdropping that Merton affords readers in his journals, letters, and prose, Gunn diagnoses his major difficulty as a problem of expressing deep feelings outside of the writing mode. This nuanced interpretation bears special scrutiny: '[F]or people of great sensitivity and inner awareness, only statements that convey the full degree of inner complexity can touch, and thereby evoke, deep feeling' (p. 103). I find in this insight a new and important hermeneutical key for understanding our hermit-monk and his inveterate habit of journaling.

Gunn traces a chain of experiences of emptiness in Merton's later youth and adolescence, a time of 'homelessness' in the orphaned young man's life. He describes him arriving at Columbia University in an 'emotional drought'. The flexible, external social persona of the collegian hid the deeper, pre-conversion levels of consciousness, 'because

he himself barely knew what he was feeling' (p. 105). The psychotherapist tallies the toll on the young man and concludes that the splitting of the self (false self vs. true self) would require 'twenty-odd years before it could be overcome and integration achieved' (p. 109). Gunn describes Merton's emptiness as a complex of existential futility, geographic instability, and the lack of any mirroring person to validate his experience and establish the self's continuity by developmental self-reflection. Readers will delight in his interpretation of the 'big man on campus' who grows and develops in higher consciousness through friendships, a confirmation of his writing abilities, and intellectual experiences in art, literature, and religion that usher him from anarchy to his first authentic worldview.

Entry to the Abbey of Gethsemani presented Merton with what Gunn alertly describes as the experience of emptiness leading either to: (1) the flight from the inner experience and preoccupation with external realities and people (diverting him from 'the inner place of trauma'); or (2) the requisite 'container within which all those strivings can be attended to, learned from, rather than run from' (p. 126). In Gunn's estimation, the monastery must become *the* place where the true self thrives. Yet his own thesis (and bias) are forthrightly stated: 'The position taken here is that Merton found in the religious language of emptiness a way of expressing and working with a deep, inner experience that, under depth psychotherapy, might have been confirmed for him and worked with in a less abstract, more directly personal way' (p. 125).

Gunn defines the Cistercian monastery with a very superficial nod to the Christian's true self 'hidden with Christ in God' as a kenotic emptying of self. At the beginning of this study of Merton he alludes to the 'kenotic goal of Christian monastic commitment' and cites in a footnote the classic text from Phil. 2.5-11. Here psychology's dialogue with Christian spirituality breaks down because Gunn gives no evidence of the Christ consciousness or deeper Christology that ground Merton's transforming experience and theological reflection.<sup>3</sup> Nor does he fathom the personalism at the heart of Christian spirituality and

3. See my *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993); 'Review Symposium on *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*' [with Patrick Eastman, Diana Culbertson, Donald J. Goergen, and Jean-Marc LaPorte], *The Merton Annual* 7 (1995), pp. 198-226; and 'Review Symposium on *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*' [with Douglas Burton-Christie, Anthony Padovana, and Christine Bochen] *Horizons: Journal of the College Theology Society* 21 (1994), pp. 332-47.

community life. Instead, we find a vacuous caricature. I came away from *Journeys into Emptiness* with the distinct impression that the author's knowledge of Christian theology and Christian spirituality is shallow in comparison with both his scholarly command of Buddhist literature and meditation practices and with Jung's depth psychology and this author's own psychoanalytic practice. It is a major weakness in Gunn's book. Even Gunn's momentary acknowledgement of Merton's 'lifelong theme' of emptiness as *kenosis* in *The Inner Experience* (p. 147) barely scratches the surface.

Along these same lines, Gunn apparently completed his research in early 1996 when only three of the seven volumes of Merton's journals were published. Such a truncated analysis precludes more complete interpretations. (It vexes this reviewer because volumes four through seven of the journals were published between 1996–98 but *Journeys into Emptiness* was not published until 2000.) Disproportionate emphasis on the early Merton and then on the hermitage years when he is infatuated with a student nurse ('M') as recounted in John Howard Griffin's posthumously published *Follow the Ecstasy* leaves a serious gap in Gunn's research. Even a few quotations from Merton's self-edited journal for 1964–65, *A Vow of Conversation*,<sup>4</sup> and a few letters in *The Road to Joy*<sup>5</sup> cannot bridge these missing years. It is unacceptable scholarship for Gunn to overlook letters to other writers from a volume like *The Courage for Truth*, published in 1993, wherein Merton is most forthcoming and intimate. It is plausible that Merton, contrary to Gunn's assessment, did let himself 'learn directly from another person, which would have required his becoming vulnerable again' (p. 175) in his correspondence with Polish poet and literary critic Czeslaw Milosz<sup>6</sup> – a necessary step in letting someone be once again an authority for him. Did not other writers or poets such as his former novice, Nicaraguan Ernesto Cardenal, also play such a part?

Because Gethsemani was such a 'tight container' for Merton's psychospiritual journey, Gunn finds that its asceticism afforded him both a deliberate entrance into his emptiness and 'the only real alternative to his self-destructive possibilities'. By offering a place for him to deal with his 'deep narcissistic wounds and deficits' (p. 129), Gunn sees the

4. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988.

5. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989.

6. *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), pp. 53–86. The complete exchange of their letters has been published as *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* (ed. Robert Faggen; New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux 1997).

Abbey as a potentially healing environs. But he concludes that the celebrity writing and journals kept Merton too narcissistic and constrained by his nemesis, self-consciousness. Gunn's riveting one-and-a-quarter page imagined psychological profile of Merton upon his entrance to the monastery diagnoses 'severe psychological issues' from his case history and marks him as a risky candidate in need of 'firm guidelines...to counter his impulsiveness and his need for adulation' (p. 130). As a professional psychological evaluation it corroborates Gregory Zilboorg's 1956 diagnosis of Merton when the two met at Collegetown in an encounter arranged by Abbot James Fox.

Brief comments about Merton's difficulties with his body and the absence of the Jungian anima deserve more scrutiny in this study. As does Gunn's claim that Merton's relationship with the community of monks was 'problematic'. Part II of the study uses the metaphor of weaving multi-colored threads to describe 10 dimensions of emptiness in Merton's experience. Once again, I find these helpful to an extent but they invariably lack the ballast of Merton's Christ-consciousness and Christology as he navigates through experiences of emptiness. Here Gunn pays a heavy price for his failure to appreciate the dynamic process and pattern of Christ's *kenosis* for Christian prayer and spirituality.

In the eighth dimension of emptiness that he outlines, 'Emptiness as Anima / Animus Failure', Gunn contributes significantly by pointing out the limitations of Merton's inner image of his actual anima that dominated his consciousness. He traces the beginnings of the transformation in Merton's anima with his reading of Russian mystics in late-1956, when Merton discovers *Sophia* as divine wisdom. Gunn connects this with Jung's interpretation of the 1950 dogma of the Assumption of Mary being the inclusion of the feminine in the Godhead. He points to Merton's intuitive understanding and further transformation through antecedents of the 1958 'Fourth and Walnut' vision with his dream of 'Proverb'. Gunn builds upon Michael Mott's reconstruction of Merton's 23 April 1959 visit to Victor and Carolyn Hammer, when the monk viewed his Russian artist-friend's triptych entitled *Hagia Sophia*. The psychoanalyst describes Merton's being deeply moved by this feminine presence, so much so that he kept rising from the table to view it. Gunn interprets this intent looking at the picture as part of Merton's 'internal process of coming to terms with his anima' — for 'the central theme of the picture is not the female per se, but her relationship to the son, whom she is "crowning with glory"'. What is most significant about this episode is that it comes six years before Merton's

infatuation with the nurse. Gunn interprets it as not only Merton's 'integrating of a truly loving mother imago, replacing his critical mother image, but also the bestowing on himself as the son, of a crown, a symbol of complete approval, acceptance and authority, an approval, as he said years before, which he never got from his mother' (pp. 161-62). As he points out, Merton's writing is never the same after this 1959 event.

The subsequent scrutiny of Merton's writing about his relationship with 'Marjorie', the nurse, receives careful attention as another experience of emptiness (facing life without her as his lover and wife) that transforms him into a wiser, more loving person. And yet Gunn is humble enough as an analyst to raise honest questions about his own interpretation.

By way of conclusion, *Journeys into Emptiness* questions whether Merton's method of contemplative prayer allowed him to go deeper into himself. Is this a fair claim by an author who displays little aptitude for the deeper Christology informing Merton's understanding of emptiness? Gunn interprets Merton's hunger for solitude in a positive light, seeing it as a healthy motive for the difficult work of recovering his true self. He concludes that Merton would have been better served by 'either an extensive depth psychological analysis and/or an extended study in Japan (or California) with a Japanese Zen Master' (p. 180). Two pages earlier, Gunn admits that neither Zen, nor psychiatry, nor depth psychology in America during the mid-1960s was ready to deal with Merton's psychospiritual journey. Does he beg the question with hindsight from his privileged vantage on the threshold of the Third Millennium?

Gunn would be well advised to include attention to the 1992 publication of Merton's two retreats for women contemplatives, *Springs of Contemplation*,<sup>7</sup> in his future work. Not only does the hermit-monk address there the feminine mystique but these conferences give evidence of a strikingly healthy working relationship with women, grounded in more than a decade of intimate friendships with the Sisters of Loretto near the Abbey of Gethsemani.<sup>8</sup> One could also inquire why Gunn has overlooked Merton's important essays in *Contemplation in a World of Action*<sup>9</sup> where he outlined his vision of monastic renewal. What could

7. Ed. Jane Marie Richardson: New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992.

8. See also my interview, 'Life through the Lens of Inner and Outer Freedom: An Interview with Jane Marie Richardson, SL', *The Merton Annual 13 (2000)*, pp. 127-43.

9. New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 1973.



be more germane to Gunn's topic than one particular essay in that book, 'Final Integration—"Toward a Monastic Therapy"', with its references to Zen, Erich Fromm, Sufism and Jung's insights appropriated by Merton through the Persian psychoanalyst Reza Arasteh? This omission is a flaw in Gunn's work.

*Journeys into Emptiness* is an important and provocative contribution to Merton studies. It deserves a place beside the works of David Cooper and Robert Inchausti—although like theirs, his book may not be well received by the Merton oligarchy. Within the parameters of the cautions I have outlined about Gunn's theological shortcomings, however, I urge every student of Thomas Merton's works and life to give it the attention it well deserves.

Once again *The Merton Journal* from England and Wales offers two noteworthy contributions. By a striking coincidence, Sheila M. Hempstead Milton turns attention to Ruth Jenkins Merton in an effort to critique Merton's changed perception of his mother in an essay entitled 'Shared Facts, Different Stories: The Mother of Thomas Merton'.<sup>10</sup> This effort might best be described as an attempt to compensate for a negative image of Ruth that Milton claims undervalues her influence on her son. Milton bases her revisionist portrait on 4-5 November 1961 journal entries in which Thomas Merton remembers his mother as 'strict, stoical and determined'; however he also describes her as 'strongly pacifist', 'strong on poverty', and the source of '[w]hatever asceticism I have in me'. She describes the latter as 'an incredibly rare glimpse of Merton's acknowledged intimacy that he shared with his mother Ruth' (pp. 38-39) and presents it as a basis, even suggesting Ruth as the exemplar for the monk's understanding of his religious vocation.

The undertow of this essay appears to be a spirited quarrel that Milton has with biographer Michael Mott's<sup>11</sup> interpretation of Ruth, an image she dubs as 'problematic' speculation and inferences as well as 'misleading conjectures' (p. 43). But Milton herself acknowledges early in these pages that resentment harbored by descendents of Ruth's sister-in-law have made access to Merton's mother's journals and young Tom's childhood writings impossible. This, she claims, perpetuates the one-sided interpretation that Ruth bitterly withdrew from life (in the wake of the dampening of her passionate love for her husband, Owen), suffered abject poverty, and attempted to starve herself. *Non sequitur!* Without access to documentation the point is moot whether one calls this a vicious 'rumor' or a fact. The premise of Ruth's 'life-

10. *The Merton Journal* 7.2 (Easter 2000), pp. 36-50.

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

long creative influence on her son Tom' (p. 37) does not hold up under the scrutiny of Robert Jingen Gunn (examined above), among other scholars. While Milton has high regard for Robert Daggy's research that contradicts Merton's own early, flattering record of Owen as he remembered him, she faults Daggy for not finding the same evidence in the case of Ruth. No doubt we lack a complete understanding of this mother-child relationship. But the preponderance of the evidence and analysis suggests that Merton suffered serious psychological pathology and it was rooted in the anima he transferred from his mother—despite Milton's plea that such is not the case.

Several nuances in Gunn's work can serve to pacify Milton's complaint. The first is the reminder that Merton's conscious memory of his mother was framed in terms of emptiness: he remembers her as cold, distant, perfectionistic, and critical. That is the fact of what the young Merton remembered and how he distinctly wrote about it. Gunn clarifies this issue as a psychoanalyst: such remembered experience is indeed *the* psychological reality for almost 40 years of Thomas Merton's life. The second relates to the 1959 event when the monk is transfixed while viewing his friend Victor Hammer's painting of *Hagia Sophia*. Out of Merton's subconscious emerges the anima, a mother crowing her son with glory and the wounded psyche begins to heal. No wonder that by 1961 his mature recollection of his mother has changed dramatically. This differs significantly from Milton's cause-effect claim that 'As a result of his [1961] conversations [and unexpected visit] with Aunt Kit, Merton, now 46 years old, develops a new understanding of Ruth, or perhaps sees her for the first time' (p. 40).

I wonder, as well, if the asceticism that Merton attributes to his mother comes more from her Quaker experience than from some innate predisposition. The Quaker virtues of self-sufficiency and discipline correlate with the virtues he admires in his later recollections. Is it not Quaker iconoclasm that Merton may be alluding to when, in his unpublished novel of the late 1930s, he has the protagonist change his mind about lighting a candle for his deceased mother?—and not the arbitrary insertion of Merton into the story on the part of Michael Mott, as Milton argues? A complex of such methodological issues arises in her work. The fact that Ruth does not mention children in her early premarital letters to her future mother-in-law does not lead to Milton's conclusion: 'What is more striking to me is that Ruth does not expect children' (p. 41). Contemporary historians discredit such suggestions drawn from the so-called 'argument from silence'.

This writer's admirable zeal for a fuller portrait of Ruth Jenkins Merton is a worthy project. The crux of the matter is the scarcity of

available sources and documentation. The artistic and interior decorating talents of Merton's mother, so evident shortly before and after World War I, perhaps make her a candidate for early feminist status. But Milton's essay (and her thesis, complicated by Ruth's relatively brief life) fails to move the case beyond wishful conjecture. Ruth Jenkins Merton does not emerge in these pages with the rehabilitated image of the exemplary mother or a substantial historical figure.

A second selection from *The Merton Journal* is James Forest's 'Thomas Merton's Journey to the Undivided Church'.<sup>12</sup> The author, a former Catholic Worker and leader in the Fellowship of Reconciliation, writes in an autobiographical voice that bespeaks his own spiritual pilgrimage from Roman Catholicism to Eastern Orthodox Christianity. He opens by criticizing ecumenism when it is nothing more than 'top-heavy institutions which arrange formal discussions held on certain topics for theology or ethics'. I appreciate the author's impatience over ecumenism that moves at the pace of glaciers, but he does not do justice to certain elements of formal, official ecumenical dialogue. Forest contrasts this with theologian Thomas Hopko's sense of ecumenism as one's coming to realize the already-given communion that Christians share: 'my life is yours and your life is mine'. He identifies this with Merton's intimate, nondenominational ecumenism and his struggle to find the undivided church.

Merton's sense of ecclesiology (in the sense of the 'invisible church') deserves careful attention in light of his own marginal identity as a twentieth-century monk. Forest is correct when he insists that Merton's interest was to purify the Christian tradition when it became distorted or calcified, not to escape from the rich and complex tradition of the Church. He identifies the consistent interest of *Jubilee* magazine (published by Merton's classmate Ed Rice and heavily influenced by the Kentucky monk) in the Orthodox Church as an example of inclusiveness. In a similar vein, Forest alertly interprets the priority of compassion over asceticism in Merton's collection of translations of the Desert Fathers' sayings, *The Wisdom of the Desert*.<sup>13</sup> But as important as Merton's ecumenical intuitions with the ancient Eastern Church were, Forest's effort collapses into an eccentric and self-serving exercise. One turns to the work of writers such as A.M. Allchin<sup>14</sup> to fathom the

12. *The Merton Journal* 7.2 (Easter 2000), pp. 2-14.

13. New York: New Directions, 1960.

14. A.M. Allchin, 'The Worship of the Whole Creation: Merton and the Eastern Fathers', *The Merton Annual* 5 (1992), pp. 189-204, and 'Our Lives, a Powerful Pentecost: Merton's Meeting with Russian Christianity', *The Merton Annual* 11 (1998), pp. 33-48.

deeper theological and spiritual currents of Merton's passion for the undivided church and the dialogue with Eastern Christianity.

Patrick O'Connell, editor of *The Merton Seasonal*, offers a new essay, 'Thomas Merton's Vision of the Kingdom' in the journal *Logos*.<sup>15</sup> His thesis is that Merton repeatedly draws upon the language of the Kingdom [of God] in writings during the last decade of his life to explore the meaning of faithful Christian discipleship. The author goes so far as to propose the Kingdom of God as a 'key factor contributing to the underlying unity of his vision refracted in so many apparently disparate directions in Merton's later work...' (p. 196). O'Connell brings his customary careful work ethic to this essay, combing a modest spectrum of the monk's later writings.

Little significant research has addressed the topic of Merton and the Bible. Although Merton's study of the Pauline Epistles is well attested in a course on the Pauline theme of sanctity that he offered to the monastery's scholastics in the late-1950s,<sup>16</sup> he certainly did not pretend to be a biblical scholar.<sup>17</sup> O'Connell marshals lengthy quotes to support his thesis. In fact, excerpts saturate the essay. They reach the extreme on page 19 where 25 of the 33 lines are quoted material from Merton; the following page is almost as dense with 17 of the 33 lines directly reciting the monk's writings. Readers are customarily alerted to excerpts of more than four lines in length by placing such quotations in block form (the editors of *Logos* apparently neglect standard editorial practice). This serves to distinguish the author's interpretive context from the actual primary material cited in support of a thesis. O'Connell's quilting of so many extended quotations raises the question of the caliber of refining and interpreting he has undertaken in this essay.

There is no question that Jesus' inaugural theme in the gospels, 'The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News' (Mk 1.15), would be central to Merton's life or to the life of any conscientious disciple of Christ. O'Connell carefully points to texts where Merton attests to this. What this essay displays, however, is the kind of idiosyncrasy that has come to dominate in Merton circles. O'Connell's thesis includes the claim that the 'image of the Kingdom is not mentioned with any frequency or examined in any depth in Merton's earlier works' (p. 195). While there are dramatic changes evident in Merton's last 10 years of life and writing, not everything can be rigidly

15. *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 3.4 (Fall 2000), pp. 222-34.

16. Cf. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1961).

17. See also Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970).

demarcated. Being somewhat familiar with the Merton canon, I puzzled over O'Connell's preliminary comment. Were we to have a concordance as a tool to use in Merton studies the matter of 'frequency' could be more easily resolved; the judgment about 'depth' of discussion presumes some theological expertise and historical perspective.

In Merton's 1953 book, *Bread in the Wilderness*, I suggest O'Connell will find ample evidence to revise his thesis. It comes as no surprise that Merton's consciousness of the theme of the Kingdom of God thrived as he daily stood in choir chanting the psalms and participated in the monastic liturgies (where the Lord's Prayer was regularly prayed) during the first decade of his monastic life. Early in his book, Merton points to the Desert Fathers and the twofold end of their monastic spirituality: 'The ultimate end of our profession is the Kingdom of God...the proximate end, to which we direct our immediate strivings, is purity of heart' (p. 20). For Merton that means the transformation and glorification of all things in Christ. He devotes explicit attention to the image and theme of the Kingdom of God on pages 32, 35, 63, 121, 130, and 136 of *Bread in the Wilderness*. These are not superficial, but central to Merton's early and evolving spirituality. As an example, he offers a sterling reflection and arresting imagery in a chapter entitled 'Dark Lightning':

But because Christ came down into this no-man's land of sin, to find us and bring us back to His Kingdom, we are able to discover the living God in the very darkness of what seems to be His utter absence. And what is more, it may be that we find Him there more truly than when we thought we saw Him in the light of our own dim day (p. 121).

In this contemplative insight Merton presages some of the more developed affirmations of humanity and the world that O'Connell identifies in the later writings. Perhaps evidence of the earliest sign of Merton's conversion from the *fuga mundi* [flight from the world] stance of his earliest monastic life can be found in another excerpt from *Bread in the Wilderness* where he fathoms the meaning of eschatology and the power of God remembered in the Psalms:

The Liturgy does not have to bring Christ down from heaven. It is the manifestation of His presence and His power on earth. It does not have to prepare our hearts for a future Kingdom. It tells us that His Kingdom has already come. *Regnum Dei intra vos est*. It is established in full power in the midst of a godless humanity. Heaven is within us and all around us, even though we seem to be living in hell (p. 136).

O'Connell's use of sources strikes this reviewer as somewhat arbitrary. He quotes from three early pages of Merton's essay, 'Blessed are

the Meek', in *Faith and Violence* but overlooks the forceful interpretive context elaborated there, wherein the monk addresses the multifaceted issue of 'power' and the Christian's practice of nonviolence flowing from the principles articulated in the Sermon on the Mount. The horizon for Merton is Vatican Council II's 'Constitution on the Church in the Modern World'. He affirms the inclusiveness of Christian hope, always seeing the other (even our reputed enemy) 'in the perspectives of the Kingdom'.<sup>18</sup>

In a 19 March 1967 letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, Merton returns to the image and theme of the Kingdom. He claims the desire 'to be effectively iconoclastic in the modern world'. He protests that if he were to 'throw up the sponge' by leaving the monastery and go out to engage in 'something more ostensibly effective' it would be 'a real betrayal not of abstract obligations but of the Kingdom'. Merton alludes to those who have exercised that option and sees their 'ending up in the most ridiculous futilities—far worse than the ones against which they are protesting'. He prefers 'this kind of desperation' as a monk on the margins of society 'without idols'.<sup>19</sup> Is this passage perhaps more impassioned and reflective on the meaning of the Kingdom than the one O'Connell identifies as *the* superlative on page 20 of his essay?

O'Connell does explore an important theme for opening new interpretations of Merton's writings. We owe him a considerable debt for initially turning over some of this turf. But such research involves the discovery and articulation of a far more complex development than this essay attests. There are serious methodological questions that need to be ironed out in approaching such a theme vis-à-vis the complete Merton canon. Why not include Merton's poetry? Why so few references to the monumental seven volumes of journals? To what extent are scholars and other readers faced with faulty or inadequate (or altogether absent) indexes when using many of Merton's published volumes, especially the works edited by others in the past 15 years? How to integrate and yet distinguish the early, middle, and later writings of Merton? Similar questions arise in another publication during the year 2000.

William Shannon's contributions to Merton studies include general editorship of five volumes of selected Merton letters and a 1981 study, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative*. This

18. 'Blessed are the Meek,' *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 20-29.

19. *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 577.

past year a revised edition was published under the title *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation*.<sup>20</sup> Shannon claims this book to be 'an extensive revision...(with numerous changes and additions)' (p. 3); chapters four and nine indeed comprise new material. Identifying contemplation as central to Merton's identity and monastic vocation, the author proceeds to assess Merton's publications over a 20-year period. He analyzes the development in Merton's understanding of the apophatic tradition to which he was most attracted.

Shannon proves a reliable guide through the Merton texts he has selected. Merton's early elitism about contemplative experience, his contempt for the world, and what Shannon identifies as a persistent dualism are critiqued vis-à-vis *Seeds of Contemplation*. The attention given to Merton's *The Ascent to Truth*, a study of John of the Cross interpreted in Thomas Aquinas's scholastic categories, proves taxing because that volume is both a writing and a theological failure. This raises the overarching question about Shannon's choice of texts. He (like O'Connell) ignores *Merton's Bread in the Wilderness*, written during the same period and arguably offering a richer theology of the Psalms and contemplation. For the greater part of the 1950s, Merton worked on *The New Man*, a book rich in patristic and Pauline theology – also passed over by Shannon.

The author makes an especially compelling case for the importance of Merton's essay, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude', to examine interrelated issues of solitude, diversion, poverty, and social witness in contemplative life. The book's longest chapter on *The Inner Experience* repeats Shannon's earlier conviction that this 1959 text is pivotal for understanding Merton's writings on contemplation. It is unfortunate that he does not refer to the serial publication in the journal *Cistercian Studies* of the complete chapters of this unpublished book, preferring to refer to an archival typescript; the book-jacket misleads readers in this regard by claiming that only scholars have access to *The Inner Experience* through the original manuscript. That was the case when *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* was published, and extensive excerpts made that volume (for a time) a unique published source. Shannon offers a lucid interpretation of Merton's spirituality of the 'true self' as the key to contemplation in both this work and in *New Seeds of Contemplation*. There is a helpful account of the variations in tone, content, and voice between the 1949 edition and 1962 revision of the latter title; the author's debt to the textual studies undertaken by Donald Grayston are evident and acknowledged.

20. Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2000.

In a similar manner, Shannon analyzes textual variations between Merton's posthumously published *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* and *Contemplative Prayer*. He ably interprets the Kierkegaardian sense of anxiety or 'dread' in light of Isaac of Stella's 'a hell of mercy and not of wrath' (p. 202). Scrutiny of Merton's use of 'meditation' rather than 'contemplation' throughout these texts offers plausible evidence of the influence of Eastern contemplative traditions on his vocabulary and passion for interreligious dialogue. Turning to *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, written in 1968 (the year of Merton's death), Shannon enables readers to understand Merton's attraction to Zen as apophatic, an 'awakening' experience of contemplation.

A question Shannon leaves unanswered is, Why arbitrarily confine oneself to an exclusive 'canon with the Merton canon'? He concentrates on only nine Merton publications that he labels 'primary sources' (p. 293). I have found diverse essays by Merton to be of extraordinary importance for interpreting what this monk means by 'contemplation'. To name but a few: 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' and 'Flannery O'Connor: A Prose Elegy' from *Raids on the Unspeakable*; 'Is Man a Gorilla with a Gun?' and the Malcolm X essays from *Faith and Violence*; a 1964 essay entitled 'The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer'; and from *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, insights on contemplation vis-à-vis the works of Camus and Pasternak. These sources name only a few works in the broader Merton canon that fail to receive adequate attention in Shannon's work. The virtual absence of Merton's poetry from the study of his contemplative experience vexes the reader if one remembers the importance of poetry to John of the Cross, among others. Is this why Shannon avoids mention of Merton's 1958 lengthy essay for *Commonweal*, 'Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal'? Merton claims that poetry is a form of knowledge that cannot be gained in any other way. The relationship between this poetic (or evaluative) form of knowledge and contemplation still remains unexamined in Shannon's new edition. It serves to call attention to his selection from a constricted spectrum of Merton's writings on contemplation. While this author includes occasional excerpts from the recently published seven volumes of Merton journals, he fails to do justice to this enormous primary material that offers continuously arresting cameos of Merton's contemplative experience.

In the end, Shannon fails to give evidence that this revised book significantly expands either his methodology or the fuller range of Merton texts that contribute to our understanding of contemplation. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to have this new edition that keeps in print his valuable original research and understanding of Merton's



contemplative vocation. A new chapter on Merton's more visible social responsibility explores how such action flows from contemplation but does not consider how there is a genuine dialectic in the exchange. The author's interpretation of the role of modern technology lacks the balanced views on this topic offered by Merton scholars such as Phillip M. Thompson and John Wu, Jr.<sup>21</sup> Finally, the claim that, 'Merton's writings seem to show no acquaintance with contemporary christological thought' (p. 151) ignores Merton studies in the past decade and should give readers pause. Shannon's 'extensive revision' does not meet the expectations he has raised.

Orbis Books continues to offer readers not only excellent volumes written by authors from developing nations, those engaged in cutting-edge interreligious dialogue, and contemporary theology and spirituality, but also the 'Modern Spiritual Masters Series'. The ninth volume in the latter series – on Thomas Merton – has now been published, edited with selections and an introduction by Christine Bochen. *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings*<sup>22</sup> is arranged according to three themes: contemplation, compassion, and unity. In a 30-page 'Introduction' Bochen manages to include a brief biographical sketch and terse comments about Merton-as-writer and his adult conversion; the bulk of this essay is devoted to identifying the three themes that structure the anthology.

As an editor of a volume of Merton's letters and one of his journals, Bochen brings a careful eye to her task. She humbly admits that the book 'does not necessarily represent "the best" of Merton's writings, nor is it a comprehensive collection of his writings'. Like most readers, upon completing the book I reached for my dog-eared copy of *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master; The Essential Writings*<sup>23</sup> edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham to compare the contents. It is our good fortune that there is little overlap in these two collections. I was pleased to find a five-page excerpt from Merton's little known conference given to the novices on 20 August 1965, the day he retired to the hermitage ('A Life Free From Care'). The genres of essay and correspondence are well represented; they are complemented by brief excerpts from Merton's books. As always I wish such editors would indulge in presenting readers more of Merton's poetry in their anthologies.

21. Phillip M. Thompson, 'The Restoration of Balance: Thomas Merton's Technological Critique', *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000), pp. 63-79; and John Wu, Jr, 'Technological Perspectives: Thomas Merton and the One-Eyed Giant', *The Merton Annual* 13 (2000), pp. 80-104.

22. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000.

23. New York: Paulist Press, 1992.

The editor's concise notes introducing many of the volume's excerpts are judicious and helpful to readers who would like to find the original sources. No doubt *Thomas Merton: Essential Writings* will be paired with Cunningham's tried and tested *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master; The Essential Writings* and teachers as well as individual readers will offer their own opinions on which taps the more 'essential' Merton. While I do find the size and heft of the Orbis book almost lends itself to the welcome 'pocket book' proportions, I am confused at times at Bochen's choice of headings and subheadings. 'A Season of Fury' led me to expect to see some of Merton's shorter poems from his collection of that title; 'From Communication to Communion' led me to hope for an excerpt from Merton's cogent and provocative 1968 essay of that title. In both instances I was misled.

In a related matter, I find the layout of the book leaves crowded pages where one excerpt immediately follows another under a common theme. But the practicalities of publishing dictate space-saving, especially in this collection where over one-fourth of the book is allotted to the 'Introduction', a chart of abbreviations for Merton titles, an overview chronology of Merton's Life and Works, and the Preface. Future editions of this anthology would prove more serviceable if an index were included to sort out sources as well as themes, proper names, and particular terms central to Merton's spirituality.

Another familiar contributor to Merton studies, Patricia Burton, recently provided an especially welcome tool with *The Merton Seasonal Index: vol. 1 (1976) to vol. 25 (2000)*, published as a supplement to subscribers of *The Merton Seasonal*. Many will remember her previous unique bibliographic tool, *A Merton Vade Mecum*<sup>24</sup> that offers readers a timeline with journal entries, letters, publications, life and historical events. What is especially valuable in Burton's collecting all this material is the introduction of helpful new categories such as: Reviews of Books by Merton and Reviews of Other Books; Persons as Subjects of Essays; and specialized sections for 'Merton's Family', 'Merton's Friends', 'Merton's Works, as Subject of Essays', etc. Authors who write about Merton will be well advised to consult this timely tool and continue their education by becoming familiar with what has already been done.

A noteworthy publication appeared early in 2001 and deserves particular attention from those who teach Merton in high school. (By way

24. Available from The Thomas Merton Foundation, 2117 Payne Street, Louisville, KY 40206-2011, USA, or via [www.mertonfoundation.org](http://www.mertonfoundation.org) at a cost of \$20.00.

of extension, I also recommend this tool for introductory courses for college students because it is of such fine quality.) The Thomas Merton Foundation, headquartered in Louisville has created *A Thomas Merton Curriculum* which is designed for use in three class sessions as part of the Foundation's enterprising 'The Thomas Merton Scholastics Program'. It is offered as the prelude to an intensive year-long invitational study of Merton involving ten high school students chosen from among a pool of applications, whose commitment to spirituality as well as academic achievements are weighed. It is an innovative and attractive approach. The genius of this work comes from the team of high school teachers and youth ministry experts who created it.

*A Thomas Merton Curriculum* rewards anyone who utilizes it with several valuable components: rationales for teaching Merton at the high school level; excerpts from Merton's works, including essays; goals and objectives for each unit; homework activity; and suggested in-class activities including carefully written discussion questions. The three units address: (1) Merton's biography; (2) Merton and Spirituality; and (3) Merton and Social Justice. As a consultant for this project, I can attest to the amount of time, energy, and expertise the team has put into *A Thomas Merton Curriculum*. And I know how ready they are to transplant the program in other cities. To inquire about this resource, contact The Thomas Merton Foundation via the internet at [www.mertonfoundation.org](http://www.mertonfoundation.org)

There is one other 2001 Merton title that has appeared on the verge of my deadline for this bibliographic essay. *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Robert Lax*, edited by Arthur W. Biddle,<sup>25</sup> offers 448 pages of virtually all new material. An earlier volume, *A Catch of Anti-Letters*,<sup>26</sup> was published in 1978 and included a 128-page selection of their correspondence from 1962–68. Biddle's work retrieves their exchange of letters beginning in 1938 and includes all the correspondence until Merton's death in December 1968.

Since *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice* arrived near the end of the academic year and all its demands, I found time only for a quick reading of this volume before my *Annual* deadline. This book warrants multiple readings and careful annotations—much like the Merton journals. Since I need to let such a monumental work marinate slowly before venturing a worthy review, I will leave it to my co-Editor, Victor A. Kramer, to offer his careful reflections in next year's bibliographic review essay in *The Merton Annual*. Readers meanwhile are

25. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2001.

26. Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1978.

advised to schedule plenty of time for this new book. If you want an early measure of it, we feature a review of *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice* in the 'Reviews' section on p. 245.

The year 2001 promises a new book harvested from the impressive scholarship of the University of British Columbia's Ross Labrie. He returns to Merton's poetry and readers can expect to be abundantly enriched by this work that has been incubating and coming to fruition during Labrie's sabbatical last year.

Other welcome signs of careful planning and incubation in Merton studies are two events for 2001-2002 under the aegis of The Thomas Merton Foundation, directed by Robert Toth. On 16 October 2001 The Thomas Merton Foundation and The Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary will present a one-day conference on 'Merton and the Spirituality of the Eastern Church: The Jesus Prayer and Hesychasm'. Speakers include Bishop Kallistos Ware (keynote address), Frederica Mathewes-Green, Rama Coomaraswami, and A.M. Allchin. The Merton Foundation also will host a two-day conference on 'Merton and Judaism' on 17-18 February 2002 at Adath Jeshurun Synagogue in Louisville. Presenters will include Edward Kaplan, Donald Grayston, and Shaul Magid. Papers from both events are expected to be collected for publication as books. These are hopeful signs amid the year 2000's relative inertia and idiosyncrasies that I have chronicled in this year's bibliographic essay.

Now, a moment for an editor's musing. I wonder if some honest questions might be warranted for quiet reflection among those of us involved in 'Merton Studies'. More and more, as various popular and scholarly writing about Merton accumulates, the issue of 'the whole of Merton's work, in context' emerges. The recent publication of his complete journals offers a good instance of how Merton Studies can be transformed, if not to say perhaps even changed. As a theologian I am reminded of what has transpired in the history of twentieth-century biblical studies: there are fundamentalists and literalists, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, there are interpreters and a variety of methodologies and sub-disciplines employed to study the texts. Furthermore, we have seen the rise of structuralists, postmodernists, and schools of critical theory yet to be named. Is not something of the same complexity reflected in the Merton industry? Is it a matter of fact that many people can find whatever they want (read, *intend* to find) in the Merton canon, without doing full justice to Merton's complexity? How can we expand the conversation beyond the margins of the relatively tight circle of critical commentators in Merton Studies?

This relates to the problem of transcending what I call a 'Merton ghetto' of critical analysis. Merton Studies have matured and progressed by engaging the religious 'other' in refreshing interreligious dialogue. Are we being equally creative when it comes to reflection (and solidarity) in terms of the spirituality, culture, and social issues affecting developing nations and our own Western world's spiritual hungers vis-à-vis Merton's enduring gifts. Or the broader public of the Academy? Or the Church?

A new journal has auditioned in the Spring of 2001, *Spiritus*, edited by Douglas Burton-Christie and sponsored by the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality. Its precursor, *The Christian Spirituality Bulletin*, matured over the past decade into this more ambitious journal. The scholars who comprise its editorial board are a 'Who's Who' of contemporary Christian Spirituality. Its premiere issue offered a bounty of essays and a broad range of book reviews.<sup>27</sup>

27. I recommend that readers subscribe now (a membership in the SSCS accompanies the subscription) and begin to participate more fully in the wider discourse it offers. *Spiritus* promises to assist us in discovering a valuable context for creative future Merton Studies. You can order a year's subscription at \$40.00 for individuals and \$27.00 for students with photocopy of ID (issues in April and October, plus membership in SCSS) by phone at 1-800-548-1784 or at the website: [www.press.jhu.edu/press/journals/scs](http://www.press.jhu.edu/press/journals/scs)