

Introduction: The Ineffable Desert and the City or What We Call Home

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Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*¹ provides a vantage point from which to reflect on the theme of the last ITMS Conference in Chicago, entitled "With Roots in Eternity: Merton, the Desert and City," and the works presented in this volume of *The Merton Annual* that continue the inquiry initiated there. Yi-Fu Tuan, retired Professor of Geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, studied the ways in which people feel and think about their place in the universe. As reflected in the title of another of his books, *Cosmos and Hearth*,² Yi-Fu Tuan understood place as a constructed habitat within the vast space of the universe. Understanding city and desert in this manner locates the city *within* the expansive desert. Furthermore, it situates Merton on the boundary of desert and city with a clear outsider/insider view of human affairs. It is from here that he engaged his contemporaries in conversation. This was no easy task. Merton had to work long and hard to find his place in the world. His writings, photography and calligraphy were the tools with which he created a *palace of nowhere*³ – an opening into the city for the infinite Source of Life to freely flow with grace and truth.⁴

With this in mind, the reader may choose to approach the publications in this volume with attention to the relationship of desert and city, the ways in which contemplation and action collaborate, and the emergence of new forms of monasticism that seek to engage the world today. In order to dig deeper into our theme, I would also like to mention in passing something noted by Czeslaw Milosz. After reading *The Sign of Jonas*, Milosz sent Merton a letter stating what he believed readers were hoping to find in his books.

1. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

2. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Cosmos and Hearth: A Cosmopolite's Viewpoint* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

3. James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1978).

4. Merton's calligraphy on the cover for this volume of *The Merton Annual*, as Roger Lipsey explains, is a fine example of what is here being said. For other examples, see Lipsey's *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston: New Seeds, 2006).

I suppose I was waiting until the last page of your book for something which by definition had been excluded in advance, so I am very unjust but I have to tell you frankly that I did not read your book as one reads a story and in this I am in agreement with your real purpose. To put it in a naïve way: I waited for some answers to many theological questions but answers not abstract as in a theological treatise, just on that border between the intellect and our imagination, a border so rarely explored today in religious thinking: we lack an image of the world, ordered by religion, while Middle Ages had such an image. This was not the aim of your diary and I have no reason to demand from one book of yours what can be demanded from all your work. But a reader (I can judge by introspection only) is eager to learn (gradually) what is the image of the world in Thomas Merton. In a period when the image accepted by majority is clear: empty Sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death. I imagine a reader who says: he possessed a secret, he succeeded in solving the puzzle, his world is harmonious, yet in his diary he tells already about sequences while we would be ready to follow him in 5 volumes through a very vision of the world redeemed by Christ.⁵

The reader of this volume of *The Merton Annual* will be exploring the border between the intellect and imagination in Merton's work and therein discover not only Merton's vision of the world redeemed in Christ but also the location of his hermitage situated in the desert just beyond city limits.

Desert and City

The following four articles provide insights into Merton's inquiry into the relationship between desert and city. **Patrick O'Connell** and **Malgorzata Poks** present us with studies of the third canto in *The Geography of Lograire*. While O'Connell begins with "East with Ibn Battuta," Poks' article continues with "East with Malinowski." Readers will find both articles helpful in understanding and appreciating one of Merton's most complicated and demanding works. It is a work that draws our attention to the essential unity of humanity and the ways in which that unity has been and continues to be violated by assertions of cultural, moral and religious superiority by one group over another. This conflict is at the heart of Merton's understanding of the relationship between the monastic life of the desert and the commercial life of the city. O'Connell

5. Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997) 61-62.

compares the memoirs of Ibn Battūta, a fourteenth-century North African Muslim traveler, with Merton's account of those travels in *The Geography of Lograrie*. He does so in such a way as to reveal humanity's propensity for self-glorification and exploitation that is not only contrary to monastic life but periodically undermines the very existence of monasteries and the contemplative life. Poks, after identifying Merton as a poet-ethnographer, situates him within modern anthropological studies. The private diary of Malinowski revealed and initiated the undoing of Western privileged perceptions of the rest of the world. As Poks skillfully explicates, Merton's use of that diary in his poem provided him the opportunity to deconstruct the mentality of the West and, as she points out, to deconstruct his own worldview that was likewise shaped in and by the West. As a monk living in the desert, he could see all worldviews, including his own, as constructed, limited and flawed, and therefore in need of continuous attention and revision in light of the limitless horizon that the desert provides.

Hans Gustafson focuses our attention on Merton's sacramental spirituality. More specifically, his article clarifies how the monastic life influenced Merton's sense of place. As reflected in much of Merton's work, the place that he sought was more interior than exterior. One might say that he sought a spacious place wherein his awareness of the sacredness of the world could become increasingly apparent. Tracing the trajectories of Merton's quest for self and place, Gustafson underscores Merton's longing for a "home" that lies beyond the city. This longing led the young monk on a lifelong and arduous pilgrimage to the desert. It is from here, however, in the desert, that Merton's prophetic vision of the world enabled him to see possibilities of new life in the city. That new life for Merton was always present. The fecundity of creation and history allowed for humanity's habitat to be daily restored in Christ. **Christopher Pramuk's** interesting article continues this line of thought by harmonizing the voices of Stevie Wonder and Thomas Merton in such a way that "our imaginations [are opened] to the life-worlds of people and places well beyond our habitual comfort zones." While this article could have fit just as nicely in the next section, I placed it here because it hints at something important regarding the way in which Merton understood the relation between desert and city. Quoting Merton, Pramuk writes: "Most of us are congenitally unable to think black, and yet that is precisely what we must do before we can hope to understand the crisis in which we find ourselves." The monk who lives in the desert, beyond all the constructs of us and them, is the one who is most able to hear, understand and appreciate the voices of others – voices that must be included for the world to be redeemed in Christ.

Voices to and from the Desert

The following articles seek to clarify not only Merton's voice but also the voices of those close to Merton who also spoke from the desert to life in the city. We begin with the transcript of one of Merton's conferences titled "Some Points from the Birmingham Non-Violence Movement," presented in the summer of 1964. Merton begins his talk in the following way:

Well, I've got some interesting stuff today, a little unusual, but I think you have to get something unusual once in a while to get a good sense of perspective as to what we're doing in the religious life and to see other people who have a dedicated approach and who get into things that require a great deal of virtue and perfection.

His reference to getting a good perspective on the purpose of the religious life fits well with what is being said here. The monastery provides an invaluable perspective on life. As we know, for Merton, the monastic life was not a rejection of the city but rather the discovery of the city as "billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely."⁶ Note that he includes here the necessity of becoming aware of those persons outside the monastery who are engaged in activities that he later says are most relevant to the work of monks.

These things are relevant for us. The things that these people did, we should be doing. Not quite in the same way. We're not engaged in this kind of particular social action, but we should be in this with people who are going through this kind of thing.

He is, of course, talking about persons involved in the civil rights movement. Here we find Merton sharing voices from the city with those in the desert, as if to say "This is a conversation in which we must participate." Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal"⁷ does just that. The interview with **Dr. Martin E. Marty** allows us an occasion to hear how that conversation went. Initially Marty had serious reservations about "Letters to a White Liberal." He questioned whether a cloistered monk is able to speak out as Merton did on this and other social issues. Marty eventually came to the conclusion that Merton was not "very wrong."

As we know, this is not the only conversation Merton had with the

6. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 142.

7. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71.

world. The articles by **David Belcastro** and **John Collins** show how Merton moved beyond conversation with the world to collaboration with those who like himself lived on the margins of society. While Belcastro focuses on Merton's work with Czeslaw Milosz and Albert Camus, Collins draws our attention to Merton's work with Camus and Walker Percy. In each case, Merton addresses the problem of nihilism and meaninglessness that had become the plague of the world described by Milosz as "empty Sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death." And, as Collins points out, it is the literary imagination that is at work in the efforts of these writers to rediscover the interior life where the search for meaning is satisfied.

Fiona Gardner's and **Robert Weldon Whalen's** articles add two more marginal voices. While Gardner opens the correspondence between Merton and John P. Harris, who was a liaison between Merton and Pasternak, Whalen compares and contrasts Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* with Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. The correspondence with Harris reveals that Merton's conversations with the world were guided by compassion and the desire for something more than just communication. He sought, as Gardner points out, "deep communion with the recipient." On the other hand, Whalen's comparison of Merton and Arendt makes clear the seriousness with which Merton approached conversations regarding the critical problems of the modern world that placed humanity under the apocalyptic threat of an atomic war.

Desert Spirituality and Urban Life

The following articles explore ways in which the contemplative life of the desert may find expression in the city today. **Hyeokil Kwon** begins this section by asking if desert spirituality is possible in the city. The question emerged from his awareness that much of urban life today is organized in such a way to make prayer and contemplation difficult if not impossible. Drawing on Merton's interest in the Desert Fathers, Kwon identifies ways in which those of us who live in the city may nonetheless maintain a contemplative practice and thereby rediscover the interior life of compassion and wisdom. **Nass Cannon** continues with an article that explores desert spirituality that is possible beyond the external walls and internal structures of a monastery. Recalling the words of Trungpa Rimpoche quoted by Merton in his last talk, Cannon explores how everyone "from now on . . . stands on his own feet." By everyone, Cannon means both monks and laity, both those within and beyond monastic enclosures with attention to those participating in the New Monasticism, the New Friars and the invisible monks that go unnoticed. **Joshua Hollmann**

then takes up the discussion with a consideration of one of the significant values of desert spirituality for today's world. Desert spirituality, now as in the past, moves beyond the boundaries of ecclesiastical structures and theological articulations and thereby provides the space needed for conversations between the religious traditions. It is also here that contemplatives discover that they have much more in common than what is commonly thought. **Mary McDonald**'s article shares with us her thoughts on an unpublished piece by Merton on *lectio divina* that opens up possibilities for interreligious reading of sacred texts and the enrichment of those who live within and outside the monastery. **Daniel Horan**'s article points out how desert spirituality is able to enrich life in the city in a way that would surprise many. The celibate monk may very well be the one to assist society in rediscovering the mystery, beauty and sacredness of married life. Caught as we are between puritans and pornographers who both believe that sex is dirty, the former prohibiting it and the latter in response to the prohibition creating an industry, Merton's vision is capable of restoring the sacramental nature of marriage:

The act of sexual love should by its very nature be joyous, unconstrained, alive, leisurely, inventive, and full of a special delight which the lovers have learned by experience to create for one another. There is no more beautiful gift of God than the little secret world of creative love and expression in which two persons who have totally surrendered to each other manifest and celebrate their mutual gift. *It is precisely in this spirit of celebration, gratitude, and joy that true purity is found.* The pure heart is not one that is terrified of eros but one that, with the confidence and abandon of a child of God, accepts this gift as a sacred trust, for sex, too, is one of the talents which Christ has left us to trade with until He returns.⁸

Joseph Raab, co-editor of *The Merton Annual*, presents us with an excellent bibliographic review essay and a fine collection of book reviews, all of which indicate that the conversation between desert and city continues and, as Raab points out, is rich with "wisdom at play in the rain of words." Merton's lifelong effort to engage us in this conversation has greatly changed our lives and our thinking. Perhaps more importantly he has brought to our awareness that we too can dwell on the outskirts of the city, in the silence and solitude of our hearts that we too can call home.

8. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 117-18.