

Introduction

Celebrating the Questions (and Answers)

Joseph Quinn Raab

When we become a question to ourselves, the religious quest awakens within us . . . a gaping abyss opens up at the very ground on which one stands. . . . Our existence has turned into a question mark. [This] signals nothing less than that one's self-existence has penetrated to an extraordinary depth.

Keiji Nishitani¹

In those days one of the things we had most in common, although perhaps we did not talk about it so much, was the abyss that walked around in front of our feet everywhere we went.

Thomas Merton²

Introductory Reflection

In a tribute Thomas Merton wrote to celebrate the life of his friend D. T. Suzuki, he lauded the Buddhist scholar with an accolade from ancient Taoist and Zen sources by calling him a “True Man of No Title.”³ With equal admiration, Rowan Williams called the famous Cistercian “a person nobody knows” in his “paradoxical tribute” to Merton.⁴ These epithets describe persons without guile who humbly point beyond themselves to the One Who is ultimate and mysterious, unfixd and illimitable. At his commission on Mt. Horeb to liberate the enslaved Israelites, Moses asked the Lord: “If I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘the God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me ‘what is his name?’ what do I tell them?” “God replied to Moses: ‘I am who I am.’ Then he added: ‘This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:13-14). It is easy to imagine Moses, underneath his fascination and terror, slightly irritated and thinking “*Really? – Are you serious?*”

1. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982) 3.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 181.

3. Thomas Merton, “D. T. Suzuki: The Man and His Work” in Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 59-66 (originally published in *The Eastern Buddhist*, D. T. Suzuki Memorial Issue 2.1 [August 1967] 3-9).

4. Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011) 17-19.

God answers the question, or doesn't, by asserting God's irreducibility to an answer, a label, a title. Taken together these recollections illustrate something of the *Imago Dei* doctrine. Created in the image of an illimitable God, human beings are marked by this transcendent irreducibility, and the more one lives in accord with this likeness the more one reveals something of it. Beneath and beyond the plethora of ascribed labels and constructed identities there remains this elusive mystery. Getting stuck in names and labels we fall into the secular, says the poet, but to enter Paradise "is to become unnamable."⁵

When one momentarily ceases to imagine one's self as a fixed being who *has* questions and begins to discover one's self instead as *being a question*, as *being's question* – there is a momentous shift. Buddhist philosopher Keiji Nishitani imagines this experience as the ground vanishing beneath one's feet. The displacement can be both devastating and delightful. For the young Merton it was a bit devastating at first because without footing he fell into a haze of mild debauchery – but this disorienting fall proved to be only the beginning of a sanctifying quest. Whether musing that "It is as if in creating us God asked a question"⁶ – or poetically proclaiming that each one of us "Comes into the world as a question"⁷ – Merton helps us glimpse the mystery we ourselves are and the Mystery from which we come and toward which we tend. Our lives become an invitation to embrace the journey of self-discovery, which is mostly a shedding of illusion and falsity. As devastating, the displacement elicits anxiety and crushes our comfort zones. As delightful, it makes us a bit giddy, relieved to discover we're not simply who we had thought ourselves to be. This delicious disorientation starts us tumbling, and like a shaken bottle of bubbly suddenly popped, we explode in a foam of further questions.

Volume 28

Thomas Merton's one-hundredth birthday has been abundantly celebrated over the past year and not without its share of popping corks. In the spring

5. Thomas Merton, "The Fall," in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 354-55.

6. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 3; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.

7. Merton wrote in his "Untitled Poem" that "All theology is a kind of birthday / Each one who is born / Comes into the world as a question / For which old answers / Are not sufficient" (Thomas Merton, *Eighteen Poems* [New York: New Directions, 1985] n.p.; Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo [New York: New Directions, 2005] 191). This poem was used to frame the 2015 ITMS conference celebrating the one-hundredth birthday of Thomas Merton.

of 2015, volume 27 of *The Merton Annual* was published as a centenary edition on the cusp of an ensuing season of celebrations that followed through the summer months. The biggest of the birthday parties was the International Thomas Merton Society's General Meeting, held at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky in June 2015. Attendees sought renewed answers to big questions about why we are here, where we are going, what is genuinely worthwhile. Since Merton was the principal interlocutor the questions and answers foaming on the Bellarmine campus all bore his trace, like a finger-sketched smile in the frothy head of a Guinness pint. Volume 28 of *The Merton Annual* returns us to the celebration because many of the articles included in it are developed from concurrent session papers and plenary addresses originally presented there. But it also contains a word from Merton himself, and even one from Pope Francis. The Call for Papers for the 2015 conference, which I've alluded to in my introductory remarks, gestured toward the marriage of mysticism and prophecy and asked contributors to set aside easy answers and to grapple again with difficult questions. Not surprisingly then, the articles here disturb and delight; they shake us out of what Merton would call our "half-tied vision of things,"⁸ propelling our quest and stirring us into hopeful action.

The first piece in this volume belongs to **Pope Francis**. It is the address he delivered to Congress when he visited the United States in the fall of 2015. As ITMS President Michael W. Higgins, Vatican Affairs analyst for *The Globe and Mail* of Toronto and for CTV Network, notes:

Although Roman Pontiffs have taken notice of the life and work of Thomas Merton in the past, none has provided so ringing an endorsement of Merton's universal ministry for peace and dialogue among world faiths as Pope Francis. Correspondence with Pope John XXIII, inclusion among the spiritual favorites of Pope Paul VI (as observed by official Montini biographer Peter Hebblethwaite), and with more than passing mention by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Merton has not gone unnoticed. His inclusion in Bergoglio's quartet of "great Americans" – the others being Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King and Dorothy Day – bears ample witness to his abiding influence as a moral and spiritual figure of enduring power. Francis's taste for the holy outlier is instructive. He could have chosen any number of tiresomely conventional candidates for canonization. He could have played it safe. He opted for the prophetic voice: the redoubt-

8. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 233.

able journalist/activist and the poet/visionary. Not only members of Congress and the Obama Administration heard Pope Francis speak of Merton's "capacity for dialogue and openness to God"; the globe attended. Not bad for the Trappist sentinel on the world's frontier.⁹

Higgins captures here how the present pope likes to shake it up. He doesn't go for the safe and conventional, but points to prophets and "holy outliers" as models for us all. We have yet to discover the full significance of the pope's choosing this particular quartet as guides for us now; but the contrast that they represent to today's loud and ubiquitous hawks and xenophobes could not be more striking or timely.

Merton's position as a peace-builder and critic of modern warfare features prominently in this issue, and especially so in the three selections immediately following the pope's address. The first is **Thomas Merton's** own "Application for Conscientious Objector Status" which he wrote in March of 1941. **Jim Forest** in his helpful introduction situates the application along with material from *The Seven Storey Mountain* and from Merton's journal entry of March 4, 1941. We find in this letter/application that Merton's written rationale remains convincingly fresh and conveys a confidence that sometimes blooms into an eyebrow-raising brashness.

The second piece takes us back more than fifty years before Pope Francis's address, when Rep. Frank Kowalski addressed the U.S. Congress. In his illuminating and timely piece "A Nation under Judgment: Thomas Merton, Frank Kowalski and the Peace Prayer," **James Cronin** elucidates the context and the significance of Congressman Kowalski reading Merton's "Prayer for Peace" in the April 18, 1962 session of Congress. We find Kowalski employing Merton as a moral authority and eloquent rhetorical ally in his attempts to persuade Congress to tamp down the escalating arms race. Like the prophet's voice ever crying out in the wilderness, the relevance of Merton's voice perdures. Cronin helps us have the ears to hear and the eyes to see the importance of actually listening.

The third piece comes from **Rowan Williams**, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, who delivered one of the most anticipated plenary addresses of the recent ITMS conference. His "Words, War and Silence: Thomas Merton for the Twenty-First Century" is included here.¹⁰ Bringing his own astonishing intellect to bear upon Merton's, Williams offers a contemplative and prophetic piece reminiscent of Merton's "War and the Crisis of

9. From correspondence with the editor, December 8, 2015.

10. I wish to thank Christopher Pramuk for transcribing the audio file of this address and editing this piece for publication.

Language”¹¹ but one which is thoroughly conversant with the challenges of the twenty-first century. The analysis Williams offers of the crisis of meaning, the trivialization of language, is sobering and disturbing, yet his own perceptible hope in the saving power of the Incarnate Word brings delightful inspiration.

The next five selections come from familiar names in the world of Merton studies, and though each explores a dimension of Merton’s perennial significance, in their diversity they remind us of his irreducibility. The first in this set is the plenary address from **Christine Bochen**, one of the original founders of the International Thomas Merton Society. In her beautifully compelling piece “Striving for Mercy: Envisioning the Church of the Twenty-first Century” Bochen illuminates the profound accord between Merton’s contributions to our future and Pope Francis’s vision for the Church in its mission to administer the balm of mercy in a world wounded and broken by violence, hatred and discord.

In the second of these **Christopher Pramuk** takes on some of the most pressing questions facing the Church in America today, questions related to human sexuality and gender. Although these particular social issues are peripheral to the ones focused on by Pope Francis and Thomas Merton, Pramuk finds relevant threads in their shared visions that have helpful implications for guidance on these questions. In his piece “God Accompanies Persons: Thomas Merton and Pope Francis on Gender and Sexual Diversity” Pramuk draws out insights that help to critique and to correct an “essentialist anthropology” that is too cleanly dichotomous and easily employed to confirm unexamined biases. What he tentatively and inchoately constructs from those insights is a creative and incarnational vision celebrating the spectrum of human diversity, an anthropology reflective of the irreducible divine.

In her piece “Unlocking the Door from the Inside” **Fiona Gardner** guides us through a contemplative process of liberation from self-imposed prisons to the freedom of what she calls “resurrection consciousness.” Drawing from Merton’s corpus and her own training as a psychotherapist Gardner describes what she sees as Merton’s “pioneering” program that begins with honest and penetrating self-analysis, which activates “the principle of salvation” and then culminates in a reconciliation of the desire for security on the one hand and the desire for freedom on the other. The instructions for “cracking the safe” that Gardner pulls out of Merton

11. “War and the Crisis of Language” in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 300-14 (originally published in *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations*, ed. Robert Ginsberg [Chicago: Regnery, 1969] 99-119).

and the resurrection consciousness she describes offer a fresh look at the struggle between fear and love, the human struggle for authenticity. In the piece we encounter the image of the true self as an open house, a welcoming home, vastly different than the all-too-familiar fortresses of the false self – fearful prisons of voluntary incarceration.

Donald Grayston's "*Consonantia* in Thomas Merton: Harmony Personal, Social and Cosmic" is a profound etymological exploration of the term *consonantia* in Merton's own work and in the broader cultural contexts that shaped his understanding and use of it. Grayston shows that Thomas Aquinas's examination of beauty in the *Summa Theologica* is foundational, first for James Joyce and then, through Joyce, for Merton. In the *Summa* Aquinas identifies the constituent elements of beauty as *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*, or integrity, consonance and clarity.¹² Among the variety of veritable translations of the term *consonantia* Grayston prefers "harmony" which frees him to explore not only the explicit use of the Latin term in Merton's corpus, which is rare, but the idea as it appears centrally in so much of Merton's work, even informing his interpretations of Taoist and Buddhist doctrines.

Grayston's meditation on harmony is followed by a piece that begins with something slightly contentious. In "'A Way of Life Impregnated with Truth': Did Thomas Merton Undervalue Confucianism?" **Patrick O'Connell** responds robustly to Wm. Theodore de Bary, who argued that Merton never really understood Confucianism and therefore undervalued it relative to his assessments of Buddhism and Taoism.¹³ Rather than challenging de Bary on the scholar's grasp of Confucianism, O'Connell points out de Bary's incomplete and thus misleading presentation of Merton's appreciation of it, based on de Bary's too limited selection and analysis of Merton's writings. To fill out the picture of Merton's high regard for this way of life, O'Connell significantly widens the scope and quells the suspicion that Merton subordinated the worth of Confucianism to that of his beloved Buddhism and Taoism.

The next three articles deal with discerning the spirits – to use an Ignatian phrase – of what's new in the so-called modern world. In this sense they return the focus to Merton's prophetic voice, though unlike the three pieces following Pope Francis's address, which attend to issues of war and peace, these three deal more with dimensions of modern alienation. As

12. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947) I.39.8.

13. See Wm. Theodore de Bary, "Thomas Merton and Confucianism: Why the Contemplative Never Got the Religion Quite Right" (*First Things* 211 [March 2011] 41-46).

an antidote to the modern world's technological alienation from nature, **Katharine Bubel** traces shared themes in the artistic visions of Thomas Merton and Terrence Malick in her essay "The Terrible, The Merciful, The Mothers': Tracing Wisdom in Merton's *Hagia Sophia* and Malick's *The Tree of Life*." Through her interpretations of the poem and the film, Bubel illustrates how both artists "draw from the Judeo-Christian wisdom tradition to present a contemplative reconciliation of faith in the goodness and beauty of the evolving cosmos with a profound sense of 'the tears of things.'" By utilizing an impressive array of sources, Bubel constructs a synthetic interpretation of these works of art that unveils their singularly sacramental vision of creation.

Gordon Oyer shows how this same vision gets continuously obscured by our own promethean illusions and projections. In "Confronting the Myth of Human Progress: Thomas Merton and the Illusion of Privilege," Oyer employs Merton's social analysis of injustices along racial, economic and technological lines to unveil the preference for the privileged that is embedded in our cultural and socio-economic structures. This preference engenders a corresponding propensity for violence which gets justified in the name of progress and for the protection of privilege. Along with Merton, Oyer points us to the gospel call for compassionate and courageous solidarity and to a preference for the poor that disempowers the illusion of privilege and promises redemption from the violent cycle of so-called progress and decline.

Rounding out this trio is "Contemplation and the *Cogito*: Thomas Merton on the Philosophical Roots of Modern Alienation," in which **Ryan Scruggs** argues that Merton saw a Cartesian consciousness as "the single greatest obstacle" to contemplation. Though Scruggs points out that Merton's reading of Descartes' own work could be superficial and thus questionably fair, he convincingly shows how Merton diagnosed dualism and the consciousness it supports as exacerbating a threefold alienation of moderns from God, from others and from the natural environment. In contrast, Scruggs luminously illustrates Merton's own understanding of identity, one arrived at not by deduction and reduction to a "thinking thing" but through the relational participation that constitutes full persons in their uncontrollable and irreducible mysteriousness – before "*cogito*" – without "*ergo*" – but in resounding echo of "*sum*" – "I Am."

Next we have another one of the plenary addresses from the ITMS conference in Louisville. Unlike the more scholarly pieces that precede it, **James Finley**'s contribution is informal, playful and intimately personal. In his piece "Thomas Merton: Mystic Teacher for Our Age," Finley shares what it was like to enter Merton's room and be mentored spiritually by

him.¹⁴ Finley arrived at Gethsemani to begin his monastic initiation as a young man with some painful psychic wounds. As his spiritual director, Merton patiently accompanied Finley through the process of “unlocking the door” that Gardner describes in her piece. Finley tells us how Merton repeatedly asked him three questions, or one question in three successively deepening ways: “How’s it going?” – “How’s it going in your surrender?” – and “How’s it going in your discovering the depth of that surrender?” He shares bits of how he and Merton answered these together and invites the reader in as a friend among them. The images Finley employs help the reader fall down deep into the delightful and bottomless peace of God, in the company of these friends.

Finally, rounding out the section of featured articles, we have **David Belcastro**’s bibliographic review of 2014, entitled “*Conversatio Morum*” in honor of the Benedictine vow of perpetual conversion. As Belcastro surveys the year of publications he thoughtfully organizes his treatment of the pieces around dimensions related to Merton’s ongoing transformation, his journey of perpetual self-discovery. Throughout his essay, Belcastro insightfully elucidates Merton’s journey as one of shedding illusory selves and reclaiming himself as at once vulnerable and finite yet tacitly transcendent. While he highlights the relevance of a wide array of works in his lucid summaries, Belcastro shows us a year replete with worthy contributions to the field of Merton studies, a waxing field with no signs of waning. He points out that since we are currently positioned between two significant anniversaries in the Merton story, the centenary of his birth just behind us and the fiftieth anniversary of his death just ahead, we can expect the field to continue growing in fruitful directions. Belcastro’s bibliographic review essay serves as a bridge to the subsequent review section of *The Merton Annual* – which explores and evaluates publications and productions in greater detail. The review section begins with an engaging symposium surrounding Gordon Oyer’s *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*, winner of the 2015 “Louie” award for outstanding contribution to Merton studies, and goes on in review of many other noteworthy publications and audio-visual materials.

Concluding Reflection

This volume looks back and ahead, returning us to a birthday party and pointing us toward another anniversary. Birthdays and anniversaries can elicit a little introspection, some self-examination along the lines of Merton’s queries posed to James Finley – How’s it going in your surrender?

14. Thanks again to Christopher Pramuk who transcribed James Finley’s address from an audio file and edited it for publication.

And how is it going in your discovery of the depths of that surrender? The further we plunge into the questions, the more we surrender our insufficient answers, the more the bottom drops out and divisions, titles, categories begin to dissolve. Rather than fighting to hold on to those things against an imaginary rival, Merton invites us to surrender happily to the embracing Mystery of loving communion. It reminds me of Flannery O'Connor's masterful short story "Revelation" – a funny and somewhat cautionary tale about a woman (or me) who tries to resist the surrender in a white-knuckled struggle to hold on. In this story the principal character Ruby Turpin is supremely self-satisfied. Her mind is a fortress of prejudicial categories and judgments reinforcing her position as superior to others. Through some shocking and grace-filled humiliations, Ruby discovers that in contrast to her own guarded and glowing self-assessment, God shows her instead to be an "old wart hog from Hell." Ruby is so upset by this revelation, so infuriated by it, that she shouts at God defiantly: "WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?" The ridiculous audacity of the question is jolting. Almost immediately, O'Connor writes: "The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity. The *question* carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an *answer* from beyond the wood." Ruby was so shaken by the echoing return of this question she thought she would die. Fortunately, the story continues. O'Connor tells us that Ruby, stunned, "remained there with her gaze bent . . . as if she were absorbing some *abysmal life-giving knowledge*." After some futile spasmodic struggles Ruby finally gets it; she lets go, and when she does, she hears a resounding chorus of *hallelujahs*.¹⁵ "The question is, itself, the answer," writes Merton, "And we ourselves are both" (NSC 4).¹⁶

15. Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation" in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971) 488-509 (emphasis added).

16. The editors of *The Merton Annual* wish to thank the contributors, review board members and all those who had a hand in bringing this text to the readers. I personally wish to thank Lauryn Dempsey, my student intern editor, for her assistance in this project. We hope you enjoy this continuing celebration.