

experience in which Finley was struck by the incongruous nature of prayer. As they heard the Angelus bells ringing in the distance, Merton stopped the firefighting group and called out, “Stop, let’s all say the Angelus!” While Finley was amused by the idea, he also recognized its underlying message: “Unless we are willing to knuckle down before the flames we will never truly pray” (86-87).

Overall, the book is a kind of balance beam of remembering. The normalcy of Finley’s experience of Merton and his time at Gethsemani points the reader to who *we* really are – *not* “some other poet, some other saint,” as Merton might say.³ “Contemplation is nothing less than that surrender,” writes Finley, “that abandon, that letting go of self to love in order to realize a deeper self born of love” (67). On this path of finding and embracing that deeper self, we often somehow find that we are simultaneously *nothing and everything*. We are *whole and we are broken*. We are *in darkness and we are in light*. Yet, God remains in the silent places – unmoved. And on this path to finding our deepest selves, we are often faced with *what or where* to really begin – where do we go amid the silences? Finley, I think, would appropriately point the reader once again to prayer: “Merton once remarked that the Church and the world do not need people to talk about prayer, think about prayer or write about prayer nearly as much as they need people to pray. Until we go to pray there is no prayer” (87).

Re-reading this important book over the last couple of years was a brand-new experience for me. Nearly six years after my first reading, I was once again left awestruck by the possibilities of continuing to heed the true self in all aspects of my life. *Merton’s Place of Nowhere* is a necessary book for spiritual seekers in every step of life – lost or found, full of faith or full of doubt – ready to meet their truest and deepest selves, *ready for wholeness*. Of all the books on Merton I’ve read over the years, this one continues to find its way to the top of the pile, exactly where it belongs.

Cassidy Hall

SWEENEY, Jon M., ed., *What I Am Living For: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2018), pp. xvii + 197. ISBN 978-1-59471-741-3 (paper) \$16.95.

[I]f you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair, but ask me what I think I am living

3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 98.

for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for.¹

This quotation from Thomas Merton's early novel *My Argument with the Gestapo* is presented at the outset as an epigraph to this collection of essays. Merton's words are essential to understanding the nature and purpose of this publication. So I begin this review with thoughts on the quotation. In a letter to Czeslaw Milosz dated May 6, 1960, Merton wrote: "I detest the fake optimism that is current in America, including in American religion. I shall continue to think about these things. The books of mine you have read belong however to a sort of Edenic period in my life, and what is later is more sardonic."² I find these lines both disturbing and encouraging. On the one hand, they are disturbing because what Merton said about America is as true now as then or perhaps even more so. Religion is not immune from the whims of a narcissistic age that desires unlimited prosperity, endless amusements and selfies from every angle. On the other hand, his words are encouraging because the *sardonic* reference hints at the prophetic vocation that became *what he was living for*.

Perhaps with the intention of clarifying for Milosz the source and intention of his later work, Merton included at the end of this letter a poem he entitled "A Messenger from the Horizon"³ (*STB* 77-78). The poem begins:

Look, a naked runner,
A messenger,
Following the wind
From budding hills.

By sweet sunstroke
Wounded and signed
(He is therefore sacred)
Silence is his way.

The *horizon* noted in the title is both the focal point of his marginal life as a monk and hermit and the vantage point from which he viewed the

1. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969) 160-61; the epigraph reads: ". . . what I am living for . . ."

2. 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) 73; subsequent references will be cited as "*STB*" parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 47-49; Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 349-51.

world. The *messenger* described in the poem is his muse. Seeing the world from this perspective and guided by a muse he described as a “friend of hurricanes,” Merton became deeply concerned by what he observed and skeptical of this nation’s future. Even so, this sardonic message is not without hope, for Merton’s muse is a “primeval angel / Virgin brother of astonishment.”⁴ This reference to “astonishment” is critical to understanding Merton. It indicates a state of amazement and perplexity that is beyond what words are able to express. So our attention turns to the last two lines of the poem:

When a message has no clothes on
How can it be spoken?

This question suggests that we must look beyond the words with which Merton clothed his thoughts. Where might that be? I suggest that we look at Merton as a translation of the message resonating from the emerging horizon.

Merton’s poetic celebration of the muse that inspired his later work provides a way of understanding the importance of *What I Am Living For: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton*. Here is where we find the message that is without clothes. As with Merton, the message is seen unfolding in the *lives* of those who have caught a glimpse of the new horizon. The *authors* of this collection of essays are themselves translations of the message.

Robert Ellsberg concludes his essay entitled “On Spiritual Exploration” (29-42) with a paragraph that could stand as a preface to this collection. He describes the authors as pilgrims walking the path earlier taken by Merton:

As a spiritual explorer, traveling without maps, Merton created his path by walking it. In his own struggles to be faithful, he created possibilities for many others to live with greater compassion, courage, and integrity in our frantic and imperiled century. Through his writings, he cast seeds of contemplation and communion that continue to bear fruit in diverse and unexpected places. For those of us who struggle to see the road before us, he is a welcome companion. (42)

4. Merton’s poem resonates with echoes of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “God’s Grandeur”: “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things; / And though the last lights off the black West went / Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs – / Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings” (Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W. H. Gardner [Baltimore: Penguin, 1953] 27).

As I traced the trajectories of their essays in this collection by representatives of various religious traditions, two road signs caught my eye: *Interreligious Dialogue* and *Theology of Encounter*, two road signs that lead to an emerging horizon of the *Hidden Wholeness of our Essential Oneness*. We will turn our attention to selected essays to clarify the road ahead and its destination.

We have long recognized the significance of Merton's openness to the world and his efforts to engage that world in dialogue. His correspondence and the personal accounts of conversations with Merton reveal a communion of hearts and minds, what Sufis call *sohbet*. Acharya Judith Simmer-Brown reminds us in "Merton on the Spiritual Promise of Interreligious Dialogue" (143-50) that Merton was convinced that communication in depth, across the lines that have hitherto divided religious and monastic traditions, was now possible and important for the days ahead. Daniel Horan clarifies what this dialogue requires of us in "What It Means to Be a Person of Dialogue" (71-85):

Dialogue is an extraordinarily human endeavor that involves vulnerability and openness and requires humility and listening. We must work to understand better our own cultural, social, and religious contexts in order to genuinely engage with others about their respective experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and history. But there is a risk. Dialogue can be unsettling or even scary. The messiness of human interaction and relationship is at the heart of all dialogue, which is why Merton explains that we cannot simply retreat to an intellectual or scholarly study, for such a detached approach forestalls the peacemaking and bridge building that come only through friendship. (87-88)

Merton opened his hermitage with hospitality characteristic of the Abrahamic Traditions.⁵ Friends of diverse religious backgrounds gathered there to discuss issues facing the world at that time.⁶ Since his passing, the hermitage has become a symbol of interreligious dialogue. Pico Iyer, in his article entitled "The Restless, Furious, Quietly Abiding Friend of Us All" (133-38), shares his visit to the hermitage and underscores its importance: "Nowadays, when I visit his little private hermitage in Gethsemani . . . I can't deny the sense that I'm coming home. Thomas

5. See Pierre-François de Bethune, OSB, *By Faith and Hospitality: The Monastic Tradition as a Model for Interreligious Encounter* (London: Antony Rowe, 2002); Mona Siddiqui, *Hospitality and Islam: Welcoming in God's Name* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

6. See Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

Merton gave many of us, from every tradition, a home, and he made it seem as large and timeless as the universe” (138). As “homecoming” as a visit to the hermitage might feel, dialogues are not without challenges even among friends. Conversations regarding religion become disruptive when they turn into debates with the intention of converting one another. Rabbi Phil Miller offers an alternative approach in “Conversion in Morningside Heights” (119-23). Conversion, understood in light of his and Merton’s experiences, does not result in the abandonment of one’s religion but rather a conversion of thoughts that becomes an occasion for growth and maturity within one’s tradition.

The other obstacle to dialogue was and remains the complex and often conflicting theologies that are brought to the table. There is a way to address this problem. Whether Merton knew it or not, he was living a theology that was emerging and would eventually be known as a Theology of Encounter.⁷ Several essays provide insights into the nature and purpose of this monastic form of theology that focuses on spiritual formation via the discipline of Love and the creation of a just and peaceful global community founded on our Essential Oneness.

James Martin in “Becoming Who We Are” (3-11) recalls Merton’s shift from an exclusivist attitude toward other religions to an awareness of the inherent beauty of all religious traditions. Interreligious dialogue would greatly influence his approach to theology.⁸ Martin’s essay is not biographical only. It is also as autobiographical. As a consequence of Merton’s influence, Martin engages in interreligious dialogue and thought. Kevin Hunt⁹ in “Our Expanded Religious and Spiritual Horizons” (57-69) also acknowledges Merton’s influence on the course of his vocation. He found in Merton a fellow monk who had discovered the deepest truth of the contemplative life not as a systematic arrangement of doctrines but rather a journey into mystery. This opened for Hunt the integration of two contemplative traditions in his life, as a Trappist monk and a Buddhist

7. See Charles B. Ketcham, *A Theology of Encounter: The Ontological Ground for a New Christology* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978); Christian Salenson, *Christian de Chergé: A Theology of Hope* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012); Peter Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith: Christianity in Interreligious Dialogue* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011).

8. See Thomas Merton, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from The Protreptikos* (New York: New Directions, 1962) as a possible source of influence on Merton’s approach to theology that is shaped by dialogue.

9. My personal encounter with Kevin while living in Residence at St. Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, Massachusetts is a memorable moment. While I was walking in silence down a corridor with an arm full of books, Kevin came up alongside me and said, “You think too much.” Yes, an occupational hazard that will not be easy to remedy!

sensei. That brings us to Gregory Hillis, who in “How to Be a Friend” (43-56) focuses on how this dialogue opens an approach to theology that inevitably deepens one’s life of prayer. Hillis illustrates this with the friendship between Merton and Abdul Aziz. Each was interested in learning about the other’s tradition. They requested and exchanged books. Most importantly they graciously attended to each other’s questions. They became, as noted by Merton,¹⁰ “brothers in prayer and worship no matter what may be the doctrinal differences that separate our minds” (47). Dialogue reveals the inherent beauty of religious traditions and the deepest Truth to which they each witness, and as we have seen, it creates a community of brothers and sisters in prayer. Following the road signs of Dialogue and Encounter, we inevitably catch a glimpse of the emerging horizon, the Hidden Wholeness of Our Essential Oneness.

Sylvia Boorstein in “Thomas Merton and the Realization of Us” (139-42) shares how her search as a Jew and a Buddhist for a deeper awareness of the authentic self brought her to Merton’s *Asian Journal* and specifically his conversation with Chatral Rinpoche. The two monks compared doctrines, a conversation in which, as Boorstein describes, the two became as one “surrounded by compassion” (142). Ilia Delio in “The Dazzling Light Within” (151-57) digs further into this experience of our essential oneness that is the result of a meeting of minds:

“[A]s human beings and societies we seem separate but in our roots we are part of an indivisible whole and share in the same cosmic process.” . . . The key to wholeness is in the truth of our identity, and this truth exists from all eternity in the love of God, a love that shines like an ever-burning flame within us. If we can find this love within and live from its radiance, we shall no longer be wandering in an alien world, for we shall know God heart-to-heart and see God face-to-face. (156-57)

Lastly, Rabbi David Zaslow also recognizes the importance of friendship that is surrounded by compassion, makes brothers of monks from different religious traditions, and opens our eyes to seeing strangers as neighbors and even more. In “Staunch Friendship for the Love of God” (177-82) he recalls the friendship between Zalman Schachter and Merton whereby “they recognized the image of God, manifest as the Beloved, in each other” (182).

For me, this is not a book about Merton. There is much here about him, but if the reader focuses on information about Merton, what is most

10. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 49.

important will be missed. Nor is it about the various writers who contributed to this volume. While you will learn something about each writer, again, what is important will be overlooked if too much attention is given to them. Merton's life and work and the lives of those represented in these essays are translations of a message that heralds an ineffable vision that is beyond words but known in the hearts of those seeking via dialogue and compassion the Hidden Wholeness that makes us One – where we recognize one another as the Beloved. The importance of *What I Am Living For: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton* will become evident for those readers who choose to become translations of Merton's message from the horizon.

David Joseph Belcastro