

## Thomas Merton's Engaged Christianity: A Bibliographic Review of 2021

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*Deborah Pope Kehoe*

One of the great tragedies of our time is that in our desperate incapacity to cope with the complexities of our world, we oversimplify every issue and reduce it to a neat ideological formula.

Thomas Merton<sup>1</sup>

Now that we have tasted hope, this hard-earned crust,  
We would sooner die than seek any other taste to life,  
Any other way of being human.

Khaled Mattawa<sup>2</sup>

The passage by Thomas Merton quoted above is found in the Foreword to *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* by the renowned Buddhist teacher, poet, peacemaker and Merton's "brother,"<sup>3</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, who in 1967 wrote the book on behalf of the Vietnamese people who did not take a side in the Vietnam War, but simply wanted the violence to end. According to the publishers of the recently re-released edition, Thomas Merton hoped that his words would speak to Americans at the time and help them see that the more America continued to bomb Vietnam, "the more Communists you will create" (Merton, "Foreword" x). As with so many of Merton's insights, his long-ago recognition of his era's widespread, often dramatically ironic, inability to contend rationally with dense social problems still resonates within a contemporary context. The year 2021 for example, represented in this annual review, was one of lethal ideological polarization, shockingly illustrated in the January 6, 2021 insurrection on

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1. Thomas Merton, "Foreword," in Thich Nhat Hanh, *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967; Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2022) x; subsequent references will be cited as "Merton, 'Foreword'" parenthetically in the text.

2. Khaled Mattawa, "Now That We Have Tasted Hope," *Beloit Poetry Journal* (Spring 2012); Split This Rock Edition, available at [www.splitthisrock.org](http://www.splitthisrock.org).

3. See "Nhat Hanh Is My Brother," Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 106-108 (subsequent references will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text); Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 260-62.

the grounds of the US capitol, an event for which, at the time of this writing, almost two years later, a full reckoning remains in the balance. And since then, public discourse in the face of new or worsening existential threats continues to ring dangerously divisive.

Into this fracturing atmosphere enters the unitive vision of Thomas Merton conveyed in his own words and in those of the many who continue to turn to him for inspiration, such as those writers whose works make up the year's bibliographic output. Although the books and articles produced during 2021 impart different perspectives, a dominant theme emerges: Merton as "man of dialogue," a phrase of praise bestowed on Merton by Pope Francis in his 2015 address before the joint members of Congress in the US capitol<sup>4</sup> (a not insignificant setting, given the temporal framework of this review). The epithet captures the essence of Thomas Merton's mature contemplative mind, anchored in his Christian faith, open to discovering and affirming truth wherever he encountered it, even in apparently opposing belief systems. The bibliographic bounty described in the following pages demonstrates the versatility of that descriptive phrase.

### Books by Merton

As is customary, this section of the review leads off with original work by Merton, attesting once again to the vast productivity of his vocation as writer and teacher and to the diligent expertise of Merton scholars in making that wealth available to the public. Patrick F. O'Connell, who has been gifting readers with these offerings for many years, has completed another stellar edition of Merton's teaching notes, in this instance, a second volume featuring Merton in conference and conversation with his novices on the subject of scripture.<sup>5</sup> In a thorough introduction, O'Connell previews content, provides context and investigates implications within those notes. With its detailed textual information, bibliography and scriptural index, the book is a must-have for any serious student of Merton's monastic pedagogy. More extensive commentary on this book can be found in the essay by Jim Robinson, located in the reviews section of this volume of *The Merton Annual*.<sup>6</sup>

O'Connell provides another addition to the body of new resources with

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4. Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2105) 16-23.

5. Thomas Merton, *Notes on Genesis and Exodus: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2*, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell, Foreword by Pauline A. Viviano (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

6. See also Emma McDonald, "Engaging the Scriptures with Humor and Humility," *The Merton Seasonal* 46.4 (Winter 2021) 26-28.

*Merton & Confucianism: Rites, Righteousness and Integral Humanity*,<sup>7</sup> the first of two books published in 2021 that complete the Fons Vitae Thomas Merton Series, a collection of over two decades of studies of Merton's interfaith relationships. In his introduction to this examination of Merton's interest in Confucianism, O'Connell makes clear that, while not as extensive as Merton's delving into other traditions, "his discussions of Confucian ideas and texts are an integral part of his overall interaction with Eastern thought" (xiii). O'Connell divides the collection into two parts, "Sources" and "Studies," moving from primary evidence of a connection between Merton and Confucianism to scholarly treatments of that association. One can find scholarly commentary on this book in the review essay by Huili Stout.<sup>8</sup>

In the final volume of the aforementioned Thomas Merton Series, editor David M. Odorisio effectively organizes a large amount of material into a coherent study of Merton and his responsiveness to Hinduism.<sup>9</sup> This valedictory publication is a rewarding finale to the distinguished series. Perusing the Table of Contents, one finds a roster of eminent scholars of Eastern religious beliefs and practices and of Merton's theological, philosophical and literary inclinations. Part III is a diverse collection of primary content, including essays and conference notes on multiple topics ranging from philosophy to yoga postures recommended for enhancing meditation. More in-depth discussion is available in the personable review essay by Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes.<sup>10</sup>

### **Books about Merton**

Fittingly, this section showcasing 2021 books that center primarily on Merton begins with a title echoing the previously mentioned words of Pope Francis regarding Thomas Merton: Gregory K. Hillis' *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision*.<sup>11</sup> The first-place winner in the biography category of the 2021 Catholic Media Association awards, Hillis' well-wrought study presents a cogent rebuttal to assertions and suspicions that Thomas Merton's Catholicism was attenuated over the

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7. Patrick F. O'Connell, ed. *Merton & Confucianism: Rites, Righteousness and Integral Humanity* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2021).

8. See also Lucien Miller, "Elective Affinities," *The Merton Seasonal* 46.3 (Fall 2021) 29-31.

9. David M. Odorisio, ed. *Merton & Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2021).

10. See also David Belcastro, "A Captivating Capstone," *The Merton Seasonal* 47.1 (Spring 2022) 27-29.

11. Gregory K. Hillis, *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021).

years by his expansive spiritual journey and its movement into ecumenism. In nine chapters, Hillis explores the different stages of Merton's life from convert to pilgrim and bookends those chapters with an introduction and a conclusion almost identically titled "Merton the Catholic," the only difference being a pertinent question mark after the initial phrasing. As a good teacher, the author includes a wrap-up section for each chapter and repeats for emphasis at key junctures the book's core argument: while Thomas Merton's religious dispositions changed over the years, his faith in the Eucharist remained the vital core of his Catholicism. Moreover, his fidelity to the mystical sacrament bore the fruit of an authentic inter-religious communion with others. Anthony Nuccio's detailed comments on Hillis' book are available in the reviews section.<sup>12</sup>

Another 2021 Catholic Media Association award winner, Gordon Oyer's *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology*,<sup>13</sup> analyzes Merton's epistolical relationships with humanitarian writers, thinkers and activists beyond the monastic sphere. In an effective framework, Oyer partitions the book into three topics: "Advancing a Catholic Gospel of Peace" (21-113), "Reaching across the Racial Divide" (115-201) and "Re-visioning a Fragmented World" (203-48), sections sub-divided into discussions of Merton's correspondence with specific figures. Of particular benefit to the reader is the plentiful biographical and historical context provided for each correspondent and issue, accompanied by the author's keen perceptions of their relevance in Merton's time – and of the hope they bring to our own. Located in the reviews section is Gray Matthews' insightful responses to Oyer's work.<sup>14</sup>

Patrick W. Collins also delves into the storehouse of Merton's letters in *A Focus on Truth: Thomas Merton's Uncensored Mind*.<sup>15</sup> Noting the ongoing, sometimes contentious, relationship between Merton and the censors of his order, whose restrictions apparently tightened in reaction to Merton's increasing engagement with the world beyond the cloister, Collins turns to Merton's copious mail correspondence for a more unfiltered voice, which, in the foreword, Jonathan Montaldo describes as "spiritual liberty and free speech" (ix) restrained only by self-monitoring. Collins organizes into ten chapters these illustrations of Merton's largely unfettered

12. See also Joseph Q. Raab, "Expanding the Vision of Merton's Church," *The Merton Seasonal* 47.3 (Fall 2022) 35-36.

13. Gordon Oyer, *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021).

14. See also Thomas T. Spencer, "Beneath the Varnished Surface," *The Merton Seasonal* 47.2 (Summer 2022) 47-49.

15. Patrick W. Collins, *A Focus on Truth: Thomas Merton's Uncensored Mind* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021).

thoughts, each focusing on a specific consequential topic, beginning with “Truth and Conscience” (1-14) and ending with “The Church” (173-95). Collins fortifies his study by directly quoting passages from Merton’s letters and citing a broad spectrum of correspondents including theologians, scholars, members of clergy and activists. Padraic O’Hare’s descriptive overview of the book is located in the reviews section of this volume.<sup>16</sup>

In *Thomas Merton: God’s Messenger on the Road towards a New World*,<sup>17</sup> Paul R. Dekar points to Thomas Merton as a man of discernment and empathy, capable of articulating the truth of human suffering while offering genuine hope for its healing. Standing on the conviction that Merton “matters very much” in today’s world, Dekar lays out a plentiful and diverse array of material reflecting his own exceptional life as student, pilgrim, activist, teacher and scholar with a long acquaintance with the mind of Thomas Merton. With allusions to the prophet Micah, Dekar entitles the first three major sections of his book, “Doing Justice” (1-32), “Loving Kindness” (33-49) and “Walking Humbly” (51-75), all of which examine in some depth selected works of Merton. More sections follow, one including an inventive but plausible transcript of the meeting-that-never-was among Merton, Thich Nhat Hanh and Martin Luther King, Jr. (82-88). The essay by Emma McDonald in the reviews section gives more in-depth analysis of Dekar’s book.<sup>18</sup>

Another illuminating portrait of Merton as “man of dialogue,” this one through a more narrowly focused lens, is Joseph Quinn Raab’s *Opening New Horizons: Seeds of a Theology of Religious Pluralism in Thomas Merton’s Dialogue with D. T. Suzuki*.<sup>19</sup> Intoning his characteristic eloquence, Raab’s erudition skillfully accommodates readers who lack a formal education in theology. Introducing Merton as an “unconventional contemplative” (1), Raab joins others represented in this overview in depicting Merton as bridgebuilder and makes a case that origins of Merton’s disposition toward true religious pluralism can be traced back to his early relationship with Zen master D. T. Suzuki. In seven concise chapters, the author tracks the growth of Merton’s fruitful encounters with other faith traditions. In the reviews section, the reader can find Chad Thralls’

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16. See also Gregory J. Ryan, “Corresponding with Grace and Honesty,” *The Merton Seasonal* 46.3 (Fall 2021) 35-36.

17. Paul R. Dekar, *Thomas Merton: God’s Messenger on the Road towards a New World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021).

18. See also Robert Grip, “The Prescient Merton,” *The Merton Seasonal* 46.4 (Winter 2021) 33-34.

19. Joseph Quinn Raab, *Opening New Horizons: Seeds of a Theology of Religious Pluralism in Thomas Merton’s Dialogue with D. T. Suzuki* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2021).

helpful commentary on Raab's work.<sup>20</sup>

Another award-winning book of 2021, Sophronia Scott's *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*,<sup>21</sup> innovatively casts Merton in the role of interlocutor. Scott received the Thomas Merton Award, affectionately called "the Louie," an honor bestowed biennially by the ITMS on "an individual who has written and published in the period between the General Meetings a work on Merton and his concerns that has brought provocative insight and fresh direction to Merton studies."<sup>22</sup> As the first African-American woman to receive this honor, Scott, with this publication, brings to the field an underrepresented voice of inquiry and challenge in a creative rendering of an interior dialogue with Thomas Merton on an array of timeless subjects. With his usual clarity and grace, Patrick F. O'Connell offers his thoughts on Scott's book in the review essay available in this volume.<sup>23</sup>

Often, a year brings new publications that enrich Merton studies, not by breaking new ground so much as by reinvigorating fundamentals in ways that are helpful for the uninitiated reader. Jon M. Sweeney's *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices*<sup>24</sup> is an example. With a dialogic approach of his own, the author opens by welcoming the unknown reader into his book. From there, he tells the story of Merton's life from a personally invested point of view, asserting that knowing Merton's life and practices encourages the conclusion that "a monk can be anyone who seeks God" (110). Paul Pynkoski shares his responses to Sweeney's book in the reviews section.<sup>25</sup>

Neither is it unusual for the annual yield of books to occasionally include self-published tributes to Merton's influence in individuals' lives. Capping off this section of the 2021 review is one noteworthy example: Ed Cysewski's *The One Original Cloistered Genius!!! Enduring Adversity and Absurdity through the Savage Humor of Thomas Merton*.<sup>26</sup> Out of

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20. See also Michael W. Higgins, "A Singular Look at Religious Pluralism," *The Merton Seasonal* 46.2 (Summer 2021) 38-39.

21. Sophronia Scott, *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

22. See "ITMS Recognitions" at [www.merton.org](http://www.merton.org).

23. See also Christopher Pramuk, "Scouts on the Spiritual Frontier," *The Merton Seasonal* 46.4 (Winter 2021) 29-32.

24. Jon M. Sweeney, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices* (New York: St. Martin's Essentials, 2021).

25. See also Wayne E. Simsic, "Monastic Spirituality for Everyone," *The Merton Seasonal* 47.1 (Spring 2022) 30-32; and Patrick F. O'Connell, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 57.2 (2022) 249-57.

26. Ed Cysewski, *The One Original Cloistered Genius!!! Enduring Adversity and*



a “fascination” with Thomas Merton’s gifted sense of humor, Cysewski collects piquant witty passages from Merton’s journals and letters and shares them as emotional relief for the stress of living in trying times.

### Books That Mention Merton

2021 also saw a host of books featuring Thomas Merton in supporting or background roles in their various narratives. Among selected items from that category is Rebecca L. Davis’s *Public Confessions: The Religious Conversions that Changed American Politics*,<sup>27</sup> in which the author situates Merton at the intersection of religion and politics in US history, as she analyzes the significant impact of the conversion of Clare Boothe Luce, renowned playwright and former member of Congress, to Catholicism in 1946, a time when many Americans were questioning the patriotism of Roman Catholics. According to Davis, Luce’s conversion fortunately “taught the American public that certain kinds of Christian faith fortified their democratic values from the terrifying possibilities of authoritarian government” (42), a lesson that was indirectly enhanced by the literary and intellectual talents of Thomas Merton, who first caught Luce’s attention with his *Thirty Poems*.<sup>28</sup> Notably, Luce would go on to endorse and promote *The Seven Storey Mountain*.<sup>29</sup>

Also spotlighting Merton in a supporting role of historical significance is *The Hermits of Big Sur*,<sup>30</sup> a compelling non-linear chronicle, supplemented by an appended detailed chronology, by Paula Huston, longtime oblate of the New Camadoli Hermitage, who tells the story of the Camaldolese community, from its medieval roots in Italy to its groundbreaking in Big Sur, California, in 1958. Once again, Merton’s letter-writing comes into play as Huston cites correspondence between Merton and Anselmo Giabbani, prior general of the Camaldolese,<sup>31</sup> along with selections from Merton’s journals and books, to illustrate how the famous Trappist’s 1950s persistent but stalled efforts to transfer to an exclusively eremitical order played a part in the development of the Big Sur hermitage.

Serendipitously styled for this year’s survey, the book *How to Be: A Monk and a Journalist Reflect on Living & Dying, Purpose & Prayer*,

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*Absurdity through the Savage Humor of Thomas Merton* (Monee, IL, 2021).

27. Rebecca L. Davis, *Public Confessions: The Religious Conversion that Changed American Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

28. Thomas Merton, *Thirty Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944).

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

30. Paula Huston, *The Hermits of Big Sur* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021).

31. See Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

*Forgiveness & Friendship*,<sup>32</sup> unfolds in a series of letters between the co-authors, Judith Valente and Paul Quenon, OCSO, who dialogue casually and solemnly – and in strikingly concrete terms – with one another about their personal struggles, idiosyncracies and victories as two complex individuals on a common contemplative path. Although their vocations differ, both writers are poets with an established relationship with Thomas Merton: Brother Paul as well-known former novice of Father Louis and longtime resident of Gethsemani; Valente as professional journalist and esteemed member (and current vice president) of the ITMS. Not surprisingly, they often invoke Merton directly, merging their singular takes on his resonance in their lives.

From the hand of another Merton studies veteran comes Fiona Gardner's *Taking Heart: Experiences of Spiritual Searching, Self-acceptance and Journeying to the Heart of Faith*,<sup>33</sup> in which the author displays her considerable wisdom and experience acquired during her years as a scholar, spiritual director and licensed psychotherapist. Gardner identifies the human heart as the symbolic origin of the human pursuit of spiritual maturity. Each of ten chapters permits the reader an inside look at this universal quest by sharing personal stories, in their own words, of individuals whom Gardner has met over the course of her counseling career. Contributing to the book's strengths are the foreword and introduction by Jim Forest, who joins Gardner in viewing the heart as "the taproot of our being" (7), and who, also like Gardner, calls to mind Thomas Merton's descriptions of the heart as the home of our hungering for God.

Lucien Miller's *The Hidden Side of the Mountain: Encounters with Wisdom's Poor & Holy*,<sup>34</sup> also places Merton within the context of the theme of spiritual questing. Miller attributes to Merton the inspiration for what has become the author's lifelong habit of going on pilgrimage. This eye-catching book colorfully depicts in words and photographs the many journeys Deacon Miller and his wife have taken to the East, brief stories the author calls "spiritual parables with signs . . . pointing to the mysterious, hidden sides of mountains" (11). In one chapter devoted to Merton, the author focuses on the prose-poem *Hagia Sophia* and holds that the impetus for Merton's explorations into other faith traditions – his

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32. Judith Valente and Paul Quenon, OCSO, *How to Be: A Monk and a Journalist Reflect on Living & Dying, Purpose & Prayer, Forgiveness & Friendship* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 2021).

33. Fiona Gardner, *Taking Heart: Experiences of Spiritual Searching, Self-acceptance and Journeying to the Heart of Faith* (Hampshire, UK: John Hunt Publishing, 2021).

34. Lucien Miller, *The Hidden Side of the Mountain: Encounters with Wisdom's Poor & Holy* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2021).



eastern pilgrimage in particular – like Miller’s own, was the longing for holy wisdom.

Similarly, the concept of life as a holy journey informs Robert Ellsberg’s edition of *Dorothy Day on Pilgrimage: The Sixties*,<sup>35</sup> described on its cover as “a chronicle of faith and action through a decade of protest, idealism, and change.” Ellsberg chronologically arranges selections from Day’s *Catholic Worker* columns from 1960 through 1969 to trace the spiritual progress of the pilgrim journalist, radical activist and future “Servant of God.” Thomas Merton’s part in this chronicle is brief but transformative: Ellsberg quotes the February 1960 column in which Day quotes liberally from Merton’s “The Pasternak Affair,”<sup>36</sup> signifying that Merton was a vector by which Day discovered in Pasternak what would be one of her life’s driving revelations: following the Gospel can be dangerous.

Two works that also depict Merton as spiritual teacher and role model are James Martin’s *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone*<sup>37</sup> and William O. Paulsell’s *Longing for God: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*.<sup>38</sup> Mixing humor, philosophy and practicality, James Martin educates, counsels and encourages readers through the process of developing a prayer life. Throughout the book, Father Martin frequently enlists the help of Thomas Merton in his endeavor, referring, for example, to Merton’s famous “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going” as a prayer with almost “universal appeal” (119-20). Likewise, William O. Paulsell (perhaps implicitly) draws upon the authority of Thomas Merton to strengthen the rationale for a broadly general treatment of Christian mysticism: early in the book, Paulsell quotes Merton’s emphatic opinion that “the mystics are the ones who have kept Christianity going, if anyone has” (14).<sup>39</sup> Further in, Paulsell devotes a brief section to Merton.

In *A White Catholic’s Guide to Racism and Privilege*<sup>40</sup> by Daniel P.

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35. Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage: The Sixties*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021).

36. Thomas Merton, “The Pasternak Affair,” *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 3-67.

37. James Martin, SJ, *Learning to Pray: A Guide for Everyone* (New York: HarperOne, 2021).

38. William O. Paulsell, *Longing for God: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021).

39. See Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 583; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.

40. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, *A White Catholic’s Guide to Racism and Privilege* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2021).

Horan, Merton is cited as a continuing source of guidance for the ongoing struggle for racial justice. As a lifelong Catholic, ordained priest and Franciscan friar, Horan speaks in a congenial first-person voice, as he establishes common ground with his intended audience. From there, he does not blink as he points to the causes and consequences of structural racism, naming it an insidious problem to be owned and addressed by people who share his racial, religious and cultural identity and conferred heritage. Horan's many references include Merton's 1961 letter to Dorothy Day,<sup>41</sup> the essay "Toward a Theology of Resistance"<sup>42</sup> and the provocative "Letters to a White Liberal."<sup>43</sup>

What might be seen as a supplement to Horan's guide, Jeffrey Bilbro's *Reading the Times: A Literary and Theological Inquiry into the News*<sup>44</sup> suggests that developing a habit of reading news sources in a manner modeled on the monastic practice of *lectio divina* could result in "a way of responding wisely to contemporary events" (4). Bilbro identifies Thomas Merton as one of the "exemplars of this tradition" (5), with special emphasis on Merton's contemplative approach to race relations and interreligious dialogue.

Recalling Jon M. Sweeney's broad-minded suggestion inspired by Merton that anyone who faithfully searches for God is, in effect, a monk, is the book by Geoff Colvin, *Contemplative Prayer at Work in Our Lives: Resting in God's Presence and Action*,<sup>45</sup> which sets out to "describe essential elements of contemplative prayer that can be practiced by seekers regardless of how busy they are and how noisy their world is" (7). Via a succinct reference to Merton in every chapter of this book, Colvin upholds him as a spiritual leader of "recent times" who has brought "contemplative prayer to everyday practitioners" (7).

Rounding out this segment of the survey of books is Jim Forest's *Eyes of Compassion: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh*,<sup>46</sup> included in this rundown not for its coverage of Merton, who appears in the book primarily in spirit, but as a recognition of the deaths, only weeks apart in January 2022, of both Forest and Nhat Hanh. With verbal economy and the crys-

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41. Thomas Merton, August 23, 1961 letter to Dorothy Day (HGL 139-40).

42. Thomas Merton, "Toward a Theology of Resistance" (FV 3-13).

43. Thomas Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71.

44. Jeffrey Bilbro, *Reading the Times: A Literary and Theological Inquiry into the News* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academics, 2021).

45. Geoff Colvin, *Contemplative Prayer at Work in Our Lives: Resting in God's Presence and Action* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021).

46. Jim Forest, *Eyes of Compassion: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021).

tallizing clarity of a masterful writer in declining health and poignantly aware of the urgency of time, Forest looks back in gratitude on moments in a special relationship, one bearing Thomas Merton's indelible imprint. Although Merton's significance to the story of Forest's friendship with Thich Nhat Hanh is not broken down in detail in *Eyes of Compassion*, it arrestingly surfaces at points along the flow of Forest's memories. For more about this book, Mark Meade's eloquent review can be found in this volume of *The Merton Annual*.<sup>47</sup>

### 2021 Merton-Focused Periodical Articles

The bibliographic review now turns to selections from the year's healthy production of periodical pieces that speak of Merton's living relevance within a contemporary context. While all of the following articles contribute in some way to the central theme of this essay – Merton's affirming engagement with the world – the variety of content, purpose and style among these shorter materials calls for further categorization of articles based on certain commonalities.

First, is a pair of articles focused on Merton's interest in Russian literature and mysticism. In an enthusiastic mix of fact and opinion, Ron Dart's "Kindred Minds: Pasternak, Zhivago & Merton"<sup>48</sup> examines the relationship between Thomas Merton and Boris Pasternak (an affiliation that makes more than one appearance in this bibliographic essay) with emphasis on the connection Merton made with Pasternak through reading *Doctor Zhivago*. Dart draws from Merton's essays on Pasternak,<sup>49</sup> Merton's and Pasternak's personal correspondence, and Merton's *The Behavior of Titans*<sup>50</sup> to conclude that Merton saw both himself and Pasternak as having the courage to speak truth to power.

Another study with a Russian accent, Kick Bras' "Thomas Merton and Hagia Sophia,"<sup>51</sup> "investigates the sources Merton used for his concept of 'Holy Wisdom'" (191). Bras delivers extended commentary on the prose poem *Hagia Sophia* in order to illustrate his opinion that for Merton, "Sophiology is not a theoretic subject . . . but an answer to

47. See also Joseph Quinn Raab, "Of Tangerines and Tea," *The Merton Seasonal* 47.2 (Summer 2022) 45-47.

48. Ron Dart, "Kindred Minds: Pasternak, Zhivago & Merton," *The Merton Journal* 28.1 (Eastertide 2021) 32-42.

49. Thomas Merton "The Pasternak Affair," *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 3-67.

50. Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

51. Kick Bras, "Thomas Merton and Hagia Sophia," *Studies in Spirituality* 31 (2021) 191-209. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Ellice Yager, Director of the Library, Northeast Mississippi Community College, in locating and retrieving this article.

a deep existential longing” (200).

A handful of articles brings scholarly attention to Merton’s literary craftsmanship. First, Patrick F. O’Connell’s “Thomas Merton’s Poetry on the Early Cistercians,”<sup>52</sup> another weighty contribution by O’Connell to the study of Thomas Merton’s integrated vocation of monk and poet, is thirty pages of impeccable explication of “St. Alberic,” “Clairvaux” and “Rievaulx: St. Ailred,” three poems published early in Merton’s monastic life, two in the 1946 collection *A Man in the Divided Sea*,<sup>53</sup> the third, in the 1947 collection *Figures for an Apocalypse*,<sup>54</sup> all representatives of that dimension of his “career” designated by George Woodcock as “the poetry of the choir.”<sup>55</sup> O’Connell ends by asserting that the poems selected for analysis “eloquently convey Merton’s conviction that from its very origins Cistercian monastic life was intrinsically oriented to contemplation” (458), an orientation compatible with Merton’s own monastic and poetic vocation.

A stimulating examination of Merton’s poetic rhetoric is found in Elizabeth Rainsford-McMahon’s “A Door Opening onto Theology: Thomas Merton’s Crafting of ‘Still-points.’”<sup>56</sup> The author tells of leading her students through a scrupulous reading of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and perceiving a pattern in which Merton periodically pauses his “meandering observations” to insert words and phrases that she calls “still-points,” verbal renditions of “an alternative [mental] space” (29).<sup>57</sup> The effect of such verbal dynamics, the professor contends, is to call one’s attention to the sanctity of the present moment in its invitation to transcend the limitations of the material realm.

Although 2021 did not see the onset and initial devastation brought

52. Patrick F. O’Connell, “Thomas Merton’s Poetry on the Early Cistercians,” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 56.3 (2021) 427-58. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Ellice Yager, Director of the Library, Northeast Mississippi Community College, in locating and retrieving this article.

53. Thomas Merton, *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York: New Directions, 1946).

54. Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947).

55. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978) 55-62.

56. Elizabeth Rainsford-McMahon, “A Door Opening onto Theology: Thomas Merton’s Crafting of ‘Still-points,’” *The Merton Journal* 28.2 (Advent 2021) 29-39.

57. Rainsford-McMahon illustrates this phenomenon by quoting the following passage in which concrete images temporarily halt the flow of expository text: “Cold stars. Steam coming up out of the kitchens into the freezing night (4:00 A.M.). Frost on the side of the coal pile outside the furnace room. Dirty bread lying in the gravel, frozen, for birds. Creak of the frosty wooden steps down to the infirmary kitchen. Flamingos on the Standard Oil calendar in the kitchen. Hot tea.” See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 316.

about by the pandemic, the year's output of periodical articles continues to tell the story of the human spirit in the time of COVID. For instance, in "Following Merton to the Cloister,"<sup>58</sup> Sam McNally-Cross relates how his reading of Merton broadened his priestly vocation by both activating and soothing his "monastic itch" during the days of compulsory isolation. In short, Father McNally-Cross believes that his "lockdown experience" was surprisingly a productive one because of Merton's nourishing guidance.

The subject of forced solitude receives stirring treatment in the following pair of articles credited to Jim Forest,<sup>59</sup> actually an edited transcript of a webinar sponsored by The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland featuring Forest and other Merton scholars in conversation about Merton's essay "The Cell."<sup>60</sup> The members of the panel consider the multiple implications of the image of the cell as a place of confinement. Noting that whether voluntary or forced (as in the experiences of monastics or prisoners of conscience), sustained separation from society can become an environment for cultivating spiritual growth. Inspired by the tree root that once adorned the front porch of Merton's hermitage, Forest uses the phrase "rooted in thin air" to illustrate his point that "There is a door within you that you can open" (57), as he shares his (admittedly uncommon) experience of having been able to turn his incarceration into a sort of "sabbatical."

The topic of pilgrimage as it variously relates to Merton, addressed in several of the year's books, again appears in Monica Weis' article, "Thomas Merton and a Curious Fourth-Century Pilgrim."<sup>61</sup> Weis relates Merton's enthusiasm for Egeria, the fourth-century seeker, presumably from Spain, whose personal accounts of lengthy travels to holy sites across the world captivated Merton to the point of declaring her "my delight!" and "one of my saints from here on!" (see 303).<sup>62</sup> Weis also cites plenty of details from Merton's novitiate conferences on Egeria and holds that through these lectures, Merton gave his novices new perspectives on monasticism, pilgrimage and devotional visits to sacred sites.

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58. Sam McNally-Cross, "Following Merton to the Cloister," *The Merton Journal* 28.1 (Eastertide 2021) 28-31.

59. Jim Forest, "Merton's 'The Cell': The Place Where We Meet Everything," *The Merton Journal* 28.2 (Advent 2021) 18-26; Jim Forest, "Rooted in Thin Air," *The Merton Journal* 28.2 (Advent 2021) 56-59.

60. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 252-59.

61. Monica Weis, SSJ, "Thomas Merton and a Curious Fourth-Century Pilgrim," *American Benedictine Review* 72.3 (Sept. 2021) 302-20.

62. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 43.

This segment closes with selected articles that revisit a recurring theme within this display of bibliographic materials: Merton as spiritual counselor to a world crying out for social, political and environmental justice. Fiona Gardner, in “Living in the ‘Unliveable’ World,”<sup>63</sup> borrows the words of Ernesto Cardenal, who, in a letter to Thomas Merton lamented that “the world is unliveable.”<sup>64</sup> Gardner examines the ways in which both Cardenal and Merton used prayer and poetry to confront painful realities and surrender them to the will of God, who, in Merton’s words, “is making something good out of it in some way we cannot see” (quoted on 24).<sup>65</sup> Gardner then proffers the experiences and verbal exchanges between Merton and his contemporaries as uplifting lessons for those who find Cardenal’s sentiments applicable to life in today’s world.

Modifying the tack taken in her previously discussed book, *The Seeker and the Monk*, author Sophronia Scott narrows the subject of her imagined conversations with Merton to a single issue in “After Indignation: I Want to Talk to Thomas Merton about Race.”<sup>66</sup> Recognizing Merton as a teacher of nonviolence, Scott calls on his voice to continue to “awaken the conscience of the white man to the awful reality of his injustice” and provides her own version of Merton’s pointed criticism of the performative rhetoric of many “White liberals” (see note 43 above).

Monica Weis, in “Rain, Contemplation, and Social Responsibility,”<sup>67</sup> also brings Merton’s prophetic voice into a discussion of contemporary crises. Using his poetic essay “Rain and the Rhinoceros”<sup>68</sup> as a point of departure, Weis focuses “on Merton’s celebration of water in the form of rain and our responsibility to protect it” (87) and notes how over fifty years ago, Merton presciently called out the consumerist culture for its exploitative commodification of natural resources. Following Merton’s example, she urges her readers also to listen to the rain and to heed what it has to teach about true and false values – and to do so now.

Finally, this review looks at two articles that reveal a quality of

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63. Fiona Gardner, “Living in the ‘Unliveable’ World,” *The Merton Journal* 28.1 (Eastertide 2021) 16-25.

64. See Jessie Sandoval, ed., *From the Monastery to the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017) 239.

65. Thomas Merton, February 21, 1966 letter to Jim Forest (*HGL* 297).

66. Sophronia Scott, “After Indignation: I Want to Talk to Thomas Merton about Race,” *The Christian Century* 138.6 (24 March 2021) 28-31; available at: <https://www.christiancentury.org/i-want-talk-thomas-merton-about-race>.

67. Monica Weis, SSJ, “Rain, Contemplation, and Social Responsibility: Merton’s Challenge to Us,” *The CEA Critic* (March 2021) 87-93.

68. Thomas Merton, “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 9-23.



Merton depicted in much of the 2021 publications: his Christ-centered inclusiveness. First, is Fernando Beltrán Llavador's "Thomas Merton's 'One Only Kindness,'"<sup>69</sup> in which the author, citing Paul M. Pearson,<sup>70</sup> begins by noting that on the same day of his famous Fourth and Walnut epiphany in downtown Louisville, Kentucky, Merton purchased Edward Steichen's book of photographs *The Family of Man*. Beltrán Llavador goes on to celebrate the multiple venues through which Merton, having viewed Steichen's photographs all together as "a picture of Christ . . . in my own Kind"<sup>71</sup> (see 3), ecstatically witnesses to the sacramental unity of humanity. Next, journalist Michael Ford, in "Thomas Merton's Journey to Dharamsala,"<sup>72</sup> narrates his personal story of getting to know Merton as a monk with a taste for jazz, lively conversation and Eastern religious traditions, an affinity that continues, according to some, to alter the relationship between Eastern monasticism and Western Catholicism. After exalting Merton's characteristic openness to new experiences, people, ideas and beliefs, Ford closes with the following advisory, suitable for all admirers of Merton's embracing spirit: "It must be remembered, though, that as a pioneer of interfaith dialogue, Merton was never a syncretist and knew the limits of ecumenism. But what he learned from other religions improved his understanding of Roman Catholicism. . . . This is surely another reason why Thomas Merton remains a prophetic voice for the interreligious world of today."

### Conclusion

On the way to finalizing this year's survey of Merton-related publications, some additional observations about Thomas Merton as "a man of dialogue" seem in order, particularly about Merton in communication *with himself*, a dimension of his messaging that sometimes complicates the experience of both the occasional and the constant reader. To illustrate, in a recent article in *America*,<sup>73</sup> Robert Ellsberg shares excerpts from his

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69. Fernando Beltrán Llavador, "Thomas Merton's 'One Only Kindness,'" *The Merton Journal* 28.2 (Advent 2021) 3-10.

70. See Paul M. Pearson, ed., *Beholding Paradise: The Photographs of Thomas Merton* (New York: Paulist Press, 2021); for more on Pearson's commentary on Merton as contemplative photographer, see Paul M. Pearson, "Thomas Merton and 'The True Self,'" *Bellarmino* (Fall 2021) 53-54.

71. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude, Journals, vol 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 183.

72. Michael Ford, "Thomas Merton's Journey to Dharamsala," *Today's American Catholic* (16 July 2021); available at: <https://www.todayamericancatholic.org/2017/07thomas-mertons-journey-to-dharamsala>.

73. Robert Ellsberg, "I Have Never Met a Real Contemplative Who Found Merton

new book of letters to and from the late Sister Wendy Becket,<sup>74</sup> correspondence that highlights Merton's troubling, yet endearing, effect on Sister Wendy, who remarks: "Somehow in God's providence this very unusual man is both called to solitude and unable to live in solitude. He holds those two opposing tendencies innocently within himself." Far from being dismissive, Sister Wendy's musing touches on a vital source of Merton's longevity as a thinker, writer and spiritual teacher. For this reader, her words recall to mind a book not likely to be familiar to general readers today, but considerably influential forty years ago in changing the approach to writing instruction in the Academy: Peter Elbow's *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*.<sup>75</sup> A specialist in composition and rhetoric, Elbow ends his book of innovative theories with some personal anecdotes on the role of dialectic in the growth of a writer's mind. Elbow, who was also a Chaucer scholar, points to the famous fourteenth-century poet's use of the medieval device of the retraction, wherein the writer beseeches the reader for forgiveness for any offensive content of a particular work. Elbow tells of how in his early reading of Chaucer, he was struck by the sincerity of the poet's voice in *both* the work *and* the retraction that accompanied it. Elbow eventually came to attribute this improbable harmony to what he simply calls "wisdom," plausibly suggesting a writer with a capacious, agile and humble mind. For Elbow, Chaucer was evidently such a writer. For this reader, so was Thomas Merton. When Merton writes in *A Vow of Conversation*, "I am aware of the need for constant self-revision and growth, leaving behind the renunciations of yesterday and yet in continuity with all my yesterdays,"<sup>76</sup> he arguably joins that special company of writers who interact dialogically and dialectically with others and with themselves, ever receptive to the continuous revelations born of deepening experience and a discerning nature, a likely source of their (sometimes perplexing) magnetism.

Ultimately, as Gregory K. Hillis's acclaimed study makes clear, in agreement with Pope Francis, the genesis of Merton's inclusive disposition is his devotion to the Eucharist and its call to imitate the love of Christ

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Useful? Letters Reveal Sister Wendy's Ambivalence about Gethsemani's Famous Monk," *America* (November 4, 2022); available at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/11/04/Robert-ellsberg-sister-wendy>.

74. Robert Ellsberg, *Dearest Sister Wendy . . . A Surprising Story of Faith and Friendship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022).

75. Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

76. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988) 19.

alive in the seemingly unlivable world. Fifty years have not retired the usefulness of his reminders that even amid the daunting challenges to peace on earth, good faith efforts to resolve problems fragmenting the human family are never futile if they arise from the hidden ground of love, the foundation of creational unity and the wellspring of “authentic hope,” which “by entering into the depths of human suffering,”<sup>77</sup> defies the alienating illusions of separateness.

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77. See Patrick F. O’Connell, “Hope,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 213.