

Introduction

Spirituality After "A Prayer Lip Stumbles"

George Kilcourse

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

"The Second Coming" (1920)
William Butler Yeats

Few lines of twentieth-century poetry capture so succinctly the collapse of the modern epoch and the vacuum that followed. Yeats has imaged the loss of communication between falcon and falconer to signal a universal failure throughout Western culture. The resulting anarchy has allowed those "full of passionate intensity" to audition their idolatries, in which everything becomes expendable. Christopher Lasch has described the debate over the proposed "turn" to "post-modernity" as "a debate conducted, for the most part, by those who know only how to shout."¹ Our *The Merton Annual* 6 ventures to decrease the decibels and to reestablish some constructive communication between our falcon and falconer: spirituality and the insights from what academe and the popular culture now call "postmodernity."

1. Review of Albert Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) in *Commonweal* 119:20 (November 20, 1992) 22-23.

A felicitous constellation of events converged to make the reconstitution of *The Merton Annual* series responsive to such new directions in "Culture, Spirituality, and Social Concerns" (as our new subtitle heralds), as well as to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death. 1968 itself stands as a watershed year of transitions and symbolic change: the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy; the "Prague Spring" presaging the momentous upheavals in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union; the Viet Nam war and antiwar protests across the United States; the Medellin Conference of Latin American bishops proclaiming a "preferential option for the poor"; the promulgation of the papal encyclical on artificial contraception, *Humanae vitae*; and the fourth general assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala, Sweden.

Each of these dramatic happenings in some way exposed the myth of Western cultural superiority. More than coincidence found Thomas Merton crossing the false and constraining boundaries of modernity with his own 1968 venture to Asia, and in the writings of his final three years at the hermitage. His assessment then of our social and political crises urged us to recover spiritual foundations for the "hidden wholeness" which related all differences through a deeper unity. A quarter of a century later, Merton's prophetic reflections have earned him the identity of a role-model for engaging spirituality in dialogue with postmodernity.

At first glance it would seem that monasticism has more in common with the pre-modern than the postmodern era. For hermits, doubly so. And yet the 1990 incorporation of The Abbey Center for the Study of Ethics and Culture by the Abbey of Gethsemani acknowledges and reclaims Merton's original vision for the "Mount Olivet Project" (Mount Olivet was the name of his hermitage) as the inspiration for ongoing, broader conversation to focus on "the possibility of the recovery of spiritual and humanistic perspectives in our age."² Its distinct concern would be the underlying questions that focussed upon "the apparent collapse of common language, traditions, and values"³—the very cultural breakdown diagnosed by theorists of postmodernity.

Thus, the Abbey Center inaugurated its emphasis on "men and

2. The Abbey Center for the Study of Ethics and Culture, Inc., "The Program: The Abbey Center Circle of Friends" (October 22–25, 1992) 1.

3. *Ibid.*, 3.

women as humans in community, in the image of God"⁴ with an October 22–25 conference for sixty diverse participants gathered at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Three of the essays in this volume were contributed by leaders of that conference. Rosemary Haughton's reflections, aptly entitled "The Fall of Babel," echo Yeats's metaphor of lost communication. Her trenchant interpretation of the revealing dynamics of the conference reflects strong undercurrents of postmodern sensibility. Rembert Weakland's personal narrative of "Monastic Values in an Alien World" speaks poignantly of the paradigm shift in his own spirituality. And Francis Kline offers impressions of the processes and personalities that combined to lead the conference in the fascinating direction where it finally turned. Roger Corless contributes an independent, freelance essay germane to our theme of spirituality and postmodernity with his cogent reexamination of the context for Merton's interreligious and crosscultural dialogue (spanning some twenty years) with Daisetz T. Suzuki.

Peacemaking proved the horizon of Thomas Merton's mature spirituality, and so it weaves in and out of these essays, as well as through the Abbey Center's charter. That document, too, is ambitious for a prophetic voice to invite transforming initiatives to counterbalance the attitudes and actions "which currently inhibit, or even cripple, often disparate and disconnected attempts to care adequately for our fellow humans, our environment, and our planet."⁵ In the summer of 1991, I submitted to the Abbey Center a proposal for sponsoring a "Scholars' Retreat" at the Abbey of Gethsemani. The suggested theme of the retreat was "Spirituality at the Juncture of Modernity and Postmodernity." Envisioned as a smaller gathering of scholars who would prepare papers to provoke reflection and conversation, this January 9–12, 1993, event was generously sponsored by the Abbey Center and hosted at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

It proved to be a unique experience for the nine participants, including myself and Michael Downey who planned and coordinated the retreat. The scholars not only exchanged thoughts on the theme, but also entered the rhythms and depths of contemplative life with the monastic community at prayer. Evening exchanges in chapter with the same monastic community extended this fruitful interchange and

4. *Ibid.*, 1.

5. *Ibid.*, 6.

affected the scholars' conversations. Amid what Merton describes as the "winter rain" of the hermitage, we trod to the Mount Olivet abode and huddled around the fireplace for a lengthy morning session to hear and to discuss Glenn Hinson's insights from Quaker Douglas Steere's interreligious explorations, how Merton resonated with his friend's breakthroughs, and how the two were mutually indebted. It dawned upon us how fitting it would be to accompany Hinson's paper "Rootedness in Tradition and Global Spirituality" with the neglected Steere-Merton correspondence which reveals their tentative planning in 1968 for the very types of gatherings the Abbey Center now hosts.

Four other papers from the scholars' retreat are included in this volume: Roberto S. Goizueta explores the aesthetics of the United States Hispanics' "mestizo community" as a postmodern alternative. Katherine TePas provides a new hermeneutic for reading Aelred of Rievaulx in terms of "mercy" and affords a contemporary narrative of praxis that attempts to enact a way out of our postmodern crisis. Steven Payne reexamines John of the Cross for applications of his apophatic spirituality to the postmodern context. Tina Pippin navigates through the neglected precincts of John's Apocalypse with an informed feminist's postmodern sensibilities.

As always, an interview with one of Merton's longtime friends provides a unique window for *The Merton Annual* readers. Philosopher John H. (Jack) Ford offers a unique perspective on Merton, particularly in light of the role he played in planning for the construction of the hermitage. Ford's remarks about Dan Walsh, Merton's mentor, prove equally engaging.

Finally, this volume offers analyses of Merton studies. Michael Downey's bibliographic essay encompasses major publications, and breaks new ground with his assessment of a necessary new turn in critical appraisals of Merton's contribution and role for ongoing spirituality studies. He signals a challenging ascent to a new plateau for Merton publications, along the lines of Francis Kline's suggestion that we take a critical, "post-Mertonian" perspective (December 10, 1991, Merton Lecture at Bellarmine College). Downey's essay is complemented by individual reviewers' assessments of particular new volumes and tapes by and about Merton; and reviews of books of related interest, all orchestrated by editor Victor A. Kramer.

Without pretending to claim Thomas Merton as a "postmodernist," one can say unequivocally that he chastened modernity for erect-

ing its worldview on the pillars of rationality, individualism, naive optimism, and an unwavering faith in progress. Much of what Merton prescribed as a "monastic therapy" was an antidote for the destructive tendencies of modernity's technological "mass man" who languishes in illusion and a counterfeit, false self. Merton discovered that the "true self" in Christ summoned us to new possibilities. Here, spirituality has found an engaging conversation partner with the post-modern voices. Merton ironically put it in his own antipoetry:

43. Voice of a prayer lip stumbles in gross assent. HELLO AGENTS THIS IS RELIGION CALLING FOR HELP. Send Argus to command another. Try that second election. Seize another paramilitary chance. Well-meaning prayer lip again fumbles message. IS GOD IN KENT?⁶

What Yeats had imaged as the collapse of communication has rebounded here in the most personal section, the North canto, of Merton's *The Geography of Lograire*. Here is perhaps an apt metaphor for spirituality at the juncture of modernity and postmodernity. In fact, Merton's own antipoetry moved beyond the particularity of his youthful crises to the broader global crises of exploitation lamented in this unfinished poem of 1968. It signals an openness to the "hidden wholeness" underlying Merton's own life and work. The inclusiveness of this new series of *The Merton Annual* ventures to expand Merton studies in conversations with such new, even postmodern voices. It also signals that this and future volumes of *The Merton Annual* will focus less upon the monk himself as an object of curiosity, and more upon the wider concerns of contemporary culture that Merton himself would have shared and explored.

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6. *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 514.