

A Review Symposium

Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ
by George Kilcourse

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Participants:

Patrick Eastman
Diana Culbertson, O.P.
Donald J. Goergen, O.P.
Jean-Marc Laporte, S.J.

I

Patrick Eastman

The task of a book reviewer usually begins by identifying the aim of the author, asking what points are being made. This is then followed by an assessment of the validity of what the author has set out to do and an evaluation of the conclusions made. Fortunately for me, in this particular case, my task is only to lay out the aims of the author and the content of this book. I say this because I am neither a professional theologian in the academic sense nor well versed in literary criticism.

Before I begin a systematic look at the book let me make a few preliminary remarks. Sometime ago I published a paper in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* on the Christology of St. Bernard of Clairvaux's treatise "De diligendo Deo." It was written under the tutelage of Dom Jean Leclercq. In that essay I pointed out the centrality of Christ in the

monastic life. In the early Church a favorite expression for the baptized was that they were "in Christ." To be in Christ was the moderating factor in all their life. Monasticism as a specific way of living the baptismal life was similarly to be a life immersed in Christ. If, then, Christ is to be the essence of the monastic life, and St. Benedict makes it clear that it is, an examination of a monastic author's Christology should lead us to the essence of that particular monk. We can take this one stage further, for if Christ is to be the governing factor of one's life then the Christology will not only be there in explicitly theological writing but it can be recognized implicitly in all other writings.

George Kilcourse has recognized this, so in his exposition of Merton's Christ he examines not only the explicit references to Christology in Merton's religious writings but also the influence of that Christology implicitly in the poems, journals, and literary essays. Indeed, perhaps that which speaks most authentically is not the consciously theological, but the hidden Christ of poems, parables, and ponderings. Kilcourse has in some ways used a Merton method upon Merton himself. In his conclusion to the book Kilcourse writes of Merton's "untiring struggle to recognize the hidden Christ of *kenosis*, as manifested in the myriad parables and ambushes of autobiography, self identity, and a post-Christian history's discontinuities." Kilcourse goes on to say that he has taken the whole mixed bag of the Merton corpus and examined it "through the master lens of his sustained Christocentric spirituality," saying that it all radiates from "his distinctively kenotic Christology" which gives his life and work "a hidden wholeness." The whole of this book is based on the assertion that "an author's metaphysic underlies all his writings."

In general terms it also needs to be pointed out that Merton was thoroughly monastic in his theological method. The Second Vatican Council saw a fundamental shift in the predominant method of theological investigation. It was a return to the way of the early Church, a way that had never been entirely lost in monasticism. The early Church began with the experience, and the theological principles emerged from prayerful reflection on that experience. It was an inductive theological method that enabled the fourth-century Evagrius to say that "the one who prays is a theologian and a theologian is one who prays." In the mainstream of Catholic theology this method was to be overtaken in the Middle Ages by the deductive theology of Scholasticism. Merton's method of rooting his theology in his own

experience is no doubt the reason why he describes Julian of Norwich as being one of the greatest English theologians. As Merton writes, "First she experiences then she reflects on that experience." Kilcourse refers to the method in his opening chapter, describing it as "[t]he shift to the autobiographical voice." He goes on to identify the philosophy of Duns Scotus, the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, and the theology of Bernard of Clairvaux as early sources "nurturing Merton's turn to experience."

In the second chapter of his book Kilcourse begins by pointing out Merton's discovery that the very nature of God is simply to exist, which led him to hunger for sharing the life of this God. In this same chapter Kilcourse goes on to point out that Merton's notion of the true self is "the inner self in Christ." It is the "paradise consciousness" of this inner self identified with Christ wrestling to be free of the illusory false self that Kilcourse suggests transcends all Merton's poems. The main thrust of this chapter is to demonstrate that the symbolism of the poetic images ultimately reflects Merton's struggle. "It is this 'true self' (or 'inner self') and the assaults upon it by contemporary society which Merton develops throughout his spirituality. He prescribes no technique, but speaks in terms of 'awakening' and 'discovery' of the inner person beneath our superficial pursuits. The poems of paradise consciousness already have manifested this dynamic." Kilcourse suggests this awakening and discovery is symbolized by the frequent references to the "shy wild deer" in Merton's poetry. The awakening to the true self comes from stillness and silence. Kilcourse points out it is a spirituality that Paul Tillich categorizes as a mystical or a symbolic type of faith. Tillich's schema outlines four types of faith: the moral, which is divided into law and prophecy, and the ontological, likewise divided into mystical and symbolic. Kilcourse states that "Tillich's schema suggests that the mature believer integrates dimensions of all four possibilities rather than isolating in only one of the four." Although it does not explicitly use these categories as a yardstick to assess Merton's development, evidence of each category emerges in Kilcourse's detailed examination of all Merton's writings.

Kilcourse, when dealing more explicitly with Merton's personal spiritual development, begins by pointing out Karl Rahner's distinction between two types of Christology: The "incarnational," where "emphasis is placed on the descent of God's Word into the World," and "the salvation-historical Christology [where] the story of Jesus'

life is central." Kilcourse traces Merton's development through an examination of some of Merton's significant works. He begins with the 1949 classic *Seeds of Contemplation*, progressing through *The Ascent of Truth* and *No Man Is an Island*, all of which he uses to illustrate Merton's emphasis on the divinity of Christ giving rise to a general rejection of the world. Beginning with *Thoughts in Solitude*, published in 1958, a year Kilcourse sees as "a watershed for Merton," he traces Merton's development to a more balanced Christology where the two natures of divinity and humanity are united in the one person, Christ. The result, says Kilcourse, is that "[c]ontemplation is demythologized, no longer a special state that removes or separates a person from ordinary things because God penetrates all . . . the contemplative participates 'in a concrete action of God in time.'" This conversion Kilcourse follows through *The New Man* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*, culminating in the 1964 essay "The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer." This integration of the incarnation, cross, and resurrection is centered in the historical Jesus. Merton grew in his sapiential understanding of this Jesus through his own experience and the influence of the Scriptures, the Desert Fathers, and patristic literature. Kilcourse asserts that Merton's study of patristic writers like Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar exposed him to writings of Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. The patristic tradition opened new vistas on soteriology and the *kenosis* of Christ, that early monastic Christology that was strongly influenced by Paul's writings (especially that in Philippians 2:1-11), giving great emphasis to Christ's *kenosis*.

In Kilcourse's book we are given a detailed account of Merton's movement to a salvation-history Christology by an examination of the influences that Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Teilhard de Chardin had upon him. This movement, we are told by Kilcourse, leads Merton to explain in *Seeds of Destruction*, that "the contemplative life cannot be a mere withdrawal or negation, a turning of our back on the world's sufferings, crises, confusions and errors." Kilcourse says it is this Christology that grounds Merton's social criticism and the insights he perceived in the writings of such authors as Pasternak, Camus, and Faulkner. The same inner belief that led Merton to recognize the hiddenness of the kenotic Christ in what some may see as strange places also led him to write, "If organized religion abdicates its mission to disturb man [*sic*] in the depths of his conscience, and seeks instead simply to 'make converts' that will smilingly adjust

to the status quo, then it deserves the most serious and uncompromising criticism. Such criticism is not disloyalty."

A Christology that is so rooted in the exigencies of life not only makes Christ real for us—a person to whom we can genuinely relate—but it also seriously affects our anthropology. Kilcourse recognizes this and devotes a full chapter to Merton's anthropology through an examination of his antipoetry. Many, like me, may not know what is meant by "antipoetry." For us there is an endnote explanation, but I'm not sure, even after reading this, that I know exactly what is meant! However, Kilcourse uses *The Geography of Lograire* and *Cables to the Ace* to give evidence of Merton's theological anthropology.

Perhaps the most challenging test of Merton's Christology comes in his interreligious dialogue. Merton's dialogical exchange included Zen Buddhists, Jews, Sufis, Taoists, Hindus, and Confucianists. The test of his Christology was in the tension between facile syncretism on the one hand and a triumphalistic portrayal of Christianity on the other. Kilcourse reminds us of how at that last fatal conference in Bangkok, when challenged over the lack of specific reference to Christ in the talks, Merton replied, "What we are asked to do is not so much to speak any more of Christ as to let him live within us, so that people may feel him by the way he is living in us." On a personal note I recall, at an open meeting with some Tibetan Buddhists, how, when aggressively attacked by a fundamentalist Christian on whether they "knew Christ as their personal Savior" they gently replied that they did not know Christ personally but had met him through many of his beautiful friends. Kilcourse's chapter on interreligious dialogue primarily focuses on Merton's writings on Zen Buddhism. He offers the criticism that Merton avoids theological rigor by keeping the dialogue at the level of experience. Beneath the ostensible conflicts of doctrine Merton suggests that it may turn out that religions have something in common "at a deeper level of dialogue." Without doubt, says Kilcourse, Merton's own Christology deepened and matured through his many years of involvement in interreligious dialogue: "Merton insists that he can remain faithful to his Christian commitment and yet learn from the Buddhist and Hindu experience. The unity he seeks is not a newly invented syncretism . . . 'We discover an older unity,' he writes. This 'original unity' means for him that 'what we have to be is what we are.'" Kilcourse goes on to remark that Merton emphasizes in his notes "the necessity of a scrupulous respect for important differences."

In the conclusion Kilcourse restates the movement of Merton from his early naive dualistic Christology to a radically challenging Christ of *kenosis* rooted in the world and the life we live. Merton, he says, "exposed the pretense of what masquerades as Christian spirituality when the 'true self' of Christ's *kenosis* is domesticated, or worse, denied: 'The problem today is that there are no deserts, only dude ranches.'" With Merton, Kilcourse suggests that "[t]he false self can ultimately be liberated only by the 'ace of freedoms,' the Christ of *kenosis*." "It is this Christ," says Kilcourse, that he has "tried to quarry from the strata of the monk's poetry and antipoetry, his journals, his correspondence, his literary essays."

II

Diana Culbertson, O.P.

Boccaccio once argued on behalf of Dante in an age that privileged theology as a discipline that "theology and poetry can be considered almost one and the same thing when their subject is the same." He thereby aligned himself not only with Dante's own defense of his work but with subsequent readers of John Milton, George Herbert, William Blake, Edward Taylor, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and now Thomas Merton. He argued further in a burst of enthusiasm that "theology is simply the poetry of God." In this assertion he went beyond Aquinas' more simple observation that figurative language is appropriate to Scripture (*Summa Theol.* I.q.1.art. 9). The imperative to resort to figure and fiction as a strategy for theologizing needs no valiant defense. Paul Ricoeur's comment is pertinent: "Any ethic that addresses the will in order to demand a decision must be subject to a poetry that opens up new dimensions for the imagination" (Paul Ricoeur and Eberhard Jüngel, *Metapher Zür Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache* [Munich, 1974] 70).

What concerns the theological critic of Merton's poetry is whether or not the metapoetic yield can be encompassed in a theological critique or whether it can (or should) be extracted at all. The difficulty is the nature of poetry itself, which, most critics argue along with Cleanth Brooks, is unparaphrasable. To reflect on Merton's Christology using his poetry as source has further obstacles: his corpus is un-