

The author's analysis of Merton's *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire* is an immensely helpful explanation of texts that are not otherwise very comprehensible. One does not have to be a literalist or sentimentalist to conclude that Merton's poetry is often less a mosaic than a clutter. The chapter "A Summa of Offbeat Anthropology: Merton's Antipoetry as Christology" is a clear appraisal of the writer's last poetic testaments in terms of theology. And for that reason *Ace of Freedoms* will be an invaluable source of understanding for those who find in Merton a voice crying in the wilderness of modern culture that Christ has emptied himself for us and is even now hidden among the oppressed of the earth.

III

Donald J. Goergen, O.P.

George Kilcourse has written a stimulating and valuable interpretation of Merton's spirituality as focused on Jesus Christ, "the ace of freedoms," the inner core of that spirituality. I can best be of service to his project by indicating some of its strengths and one of its limitations. I shall mention three of the strengths and then give attention to the limitation, since confronting it will be of more value to Kilcourse.

I myself am not a Merton scholar, although I have been a reader of Merton through the years. The greatest strength of Kilcourse's project is his extensive familiarity with the entire Merton corpus. That means his work must be taken seriously.

A second major strength of *Ace of Freedoms* is the interrelatedness Kilcourse unveils within (1) Merton's spiritual theology of the inner/true self, (2) Merton's image of Christ, and (3) Merton's own autobiographical journey. Merton's own spiritual journey toward his true self is a process of discovering the real Jesus Christ. For Kilcourse, Merton's autobiography is Christology and Merton's Christology is autobiography.

A third strength of Kilcourse's work is his ability to see spirituality as a matrix or source for theology. This point may be controversial. However, as a systematic theologian, I see this as a strength—moving beyond the dichotomy between spirituality and theology that plagues the modern West. Spirituality is theology, and theology is spir-

ity. True theology is done on one's knees as well as in the library, and spirituality nourishes the head as well as the heart. Along with this strength is Kilcourse's awareness that, for Merton, poetry is a kind of knowledge (cf. 42-45). This is to Kilcourse's and Merton's credit. Not all knowledge is objective, rational, or scientific knowledge. Some knowledge is more personal; some more symbolic. The language of poetry is essential for articulating spiritual experience. Kilcourse's insistence on the theological value of Merton's poetry is related to the first strength mentioned above—his familiarity with the entire Merton corpus, including the poetry and the later Merton. A bottom line is that we must see Merton as a true theologian.

And now to turn to a limitation, or a way in which *Ace of Freedoms* is vulnerable: Kilcourse's tendency toward overstatement, which can then leave one unconvinced. For example, Kilcourse affirms strongly a discontinuity between the early and later Merton. Yet on the basis of the material presented, one could easily argue a more gradual, less dramatic development, at least in his Christology. No one would deny the development. The following is a fairly balanced statement:

I propose to place in sharp relief the contrast between the early and the late Merton, without overlooking certain continuities. But the emphasis here will be on the contrast between the christological insights of the mature Merton and the earlier disguised voices and contorted postures which he sometimes permitted himself to adopt as a young monk (6).

Fair enough. But the following is exaggeration:

The distance between the forms and spiritual horizon of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, or the familiar lyric poetry of the 1940s, and the mature Merton's antipoetry, or the christology to be quarried from its deep strata can be measured only in light years (157).

I remained unconvinced by the material presented of a contrast that great. There rather seems to be in Merton a movement from world denial to world affirmation (224), which does not require that strong a break in his Christology.

This tendency toward overstatement surfaces in Kilcourse's sketching of Merton's kenotic Christology, which is at the heart of the

book, and thus leaves a very valid insight vulnerable. A valid point is made early by Kilcourse:

To suggest that Thomas Merton developed a full-blown christology would be to exaggerate his contribution. He remained an essayist, allergic to all efforts at systematizing or methodological expositions (3).

We are dealing more with a Christ-centered spirituality (1, 221) than with an explicit Christology. Why then be so insistent on a "kenotic christology" and "a christology from below"? Such labels make Merton's inchoate Christology (3) seem more self-conscious than it was.

The following is a beautiful, insightful, significant statement that does justice to the data:

He [Merton] discovers the epiphany of Christ in the human experience of poverty, in historical discontinuities, at the margins of Christendom, and in the rejection and vulnerability of the world's scarred victims and despised outcasts (225).

But is any and every Christology sensitive to "the epiphany of God in weakness and defenselessness" (1) kenotic? How is Kilcourse using the term? How did Merton himself, who used it but not all that frequently (cf. 127, 202, 209, 212, 214, 215, 223), understand it? It seems to me that Merton did not have an explicit kenotic Christology as much as a kenotic image of Christ.

I do not think of Merton's mature or later writings as expressive of "a christology from below." Such language is too theologically technical to do justice to Merton's powerful and suggestive insights. Certainly there was a move away from dogmatic efforts. Yet, is every Christology that gives emphasis to the humanity of Jesus a Christology from below?

There are other adjectives equally accurate to describe Merton's inchoate Christology, all of which Kilcourse uses: monastic, mystical, apophatic, experiential, social. This in no way denies a valid kenotic dimension mined from Merton's writings, but the emphasis on it does appear as overemphasis. Not every reference to emptiness necessarily suggests a kenotic Christology as such. One of the best texts in which Merton speaks of his own image of Christ is from one of his

letters; Kilcourse quotes this at length (223). The quote seems to be a very apt summary of Merton's Christological directions.

This suggestion that Kilcourse at times tends to overstate does not diminish the strengths of *Ace of Freedoms* with which I began. The overstatements make valuable and suggestive insights vulnerable. Kilcourse must be complimented for his extensive familiarity with the entire Merton corpus; his integration of Merton's autobiographical, Christological, and spiritual insights; and his willingness to see in spiritual/mystical writings and poetry a matrix and source for theology. This latter in particular is perhaps the major achievement of Kilcourse. "Mining" what we might ordinarily think of as nontheological sources such as letters and poetry yields particularly rich theological insights. The book is certainly to be recommended to Merton readers for a fuller and deeper knowledge of his Christology and spirituality.

IV

Jean-Marc Laporte, S.J.

George Kilcourse's book, which beautifully allies theology and imagination, invites comment from many different points of view. Primarily a work of interpretation that takes us through the corpus of Thomas Merton, it offers a fresh Mertonian perspective in which theology, autobiography, and self-identity converge (1-2). It deserves review as a work of interpretation, but the theological themes that emerge out of it are just as deserving of comment. In addition, one could develop a meta-reflection on the interrelation of the personal spiritual quest and authentic theology as it emerges in this work, discerning in Merton not just a spiritual guide but also a contributor to theological method. I have been asked to focus on *kenosis*, an architectonic theological theme that surfaces at many strategic points in the writings of Thomas Merton and runs through the whole of Kilcourse's book. A theme both classical and contemporary, it has elicited theological creativity down through the centuries.¹ It fosters the develop-

1. One would normally evoke the kenotic Christologies of the 19th and early 20th centuries, but more to the point is Luther's creative response to this theme. The Lord/slave dialectic of Philippians 2:6-11 plays a key role in his theology of grace, as we see in *Freedom of a Christian*. The terms he uses to translate two key