

## Introduction: Immersed, Transformed and Open

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When this volume of *The Merton Annual* appears, 110 years will have passed since Merton's birth in January 1915. Taking notice of that fact has prompted me to remember the flurry of commemorations, remembrances and celebrations that occurred in 2015, the centenary of Merton's birth. Perhaps most notable among my personal memories of that year is standing on the West lawn of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC, watching on large projection screens the address being given to Congress at that moment by Pope Francis. As many readers will remember, in the Pope's address he highlighted four noteworthy Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. Of Merton, he said: "Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions."<sup>1</sup>

These words later gave inspiration to theologian and Merton scholar Gregory Hillis, whose book *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* was recognized with the International Thomas Merton Society's "Louie" award for best new book on Merton in 2023. Sadly, Greg Hillis died of cancer at a much-too-young age in late 2024. His passing is a loss for the Merton community, but we are blessed that his work remains with us. At the closing of *Man of Dialogue*, Hillis writes that Merton was "deeply immersed in and transformed by his own tradition, and . . . opened himself radically to the world and to others."<sup>2</sup>

This dialectic of being rooted in a tradition that has formed and transformed, while simultaneously being open to the wide possibilities of other people, practices and perspectives, is central to Merton's continued relevance and appeal. As we move further away in time from Merton's own age, as the cultural context in which Merton lived, thought and wrote becomes less familiar, and as the world evolves in ever new directions that

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1. Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 21; *Washington Post*, September 24, 2015; available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/transcript-pope-franciss-speech-to-congress/2015/09/24/6d7d7ac8-62bf-11e5-8e9e-dce8a2a2a679\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/transcript-pope-franciss-speech-to-congress/2015/09/24/6d7d7ac8-62bf-11e5-8e9e-dce8a2a2a679_story.html) [accessed 13 December 2024].

2. Gregory K. Hillis, *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021) 284.

Merton (or anyone of his time) couldn't have foreseen, people around the world continue to find new and meaningful insights in Merton's writing. I am convinced that this is because Merton was constantly curious, ever open to new ways of seeing the world and experiencing the spiritual life, and ceaselessly searching for new partners in dialogue.

The articles and book reviews collected in this volume of *The Merton Annual* reflect the fruits that continue to be borne in exploring Merton's dialogical intellectual and spiritual orientation. Though diverse in topics and styles, the materials that follow bear witness to the breadth of conversations that Merton was engaged in – and that he continues to inspire these many years later.

As is customary, the first offering in this volume is a previously unpublished work by Thomas Merton. In this case, it is a transcription of a talk given by Merton to a gathering of novice masters of North American monasteries who were at the Abbey of Gethsemani in June 1968. Given within only six months of his death and titled “The Present ‘Crisis’ in Monasticism,” the talk represents some of Merton's most mature thinking about the monastic vocation and the relationship of the monk to the world. Merton describes the monastic life as a life of paradoxical freedom: by taking on the vow of strict obedience, the monk is liberated (at least partially) from the economic and political structures which exercise such overwhelming control over most people. At the same time, Merton says, the monastic life is a “desert life” characterized by a certain kind of insecurity. This combination of freedom and insecurity is the precondition for the possibility of inner change. Merton says, “We are called to a life in which the self that we once knew and once lived with has to be completely overturned and revolutionized and transformed by the Spirit.” Following Merton's prepared comments, the transcription records a question-and-answer conversation among Merton and the other monks gathered.

Next, we are proud to make available the text originally presented by **Ilia Delio, OSF** as the inaugural 4th & Walnut Lecture, delivered at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana in November 2023. The article, entitled “Merton's Christophany, Teilhard's Challenge and the Second Axial Monk,” begins with a declaration that Delio is “not a Merton scholar.” Delio's modesty is belied, however, by the incisiveness of the analysis that follows. Drawing on her deep knowledge of the work of Jesuit theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Delio explores a number of parallels and consonances between Merton and Teilhard, portraying them as “complementary in spiritual outlook.” Merton did not read Teilhard exhaustively, and was critical of Teilhard in some important respects, but Delio shows also that Merton “woke up to the significance of Teilhard.”

She highlights numerous areas of agreement between Merton and Teilhard, including particularly interesting discussions of their incarnational spiritualities which aimed to draw the religious attention not merely to the heavens but also to the earth and to humankind. Ultimately, Delio concludes that Merton and Teilhard were both “mutational figures” driving the Christian tradition – and humanity – forward into new realms of understanding.

Merton’s wide-ranging literary appetite and his curiosity for varied experiences of spirituality drew him not only to explore non-Christian religious perspectives, but also to the breadth of wisdom within Christian traditions other than his own Roman Catholicism. **Christopher Pramuk’s** article, “‘A Conscience Burning with Impatience’: Merton and the Art of Apocalyptic Times,” highlights Merton’s engagement with the works of the Russian Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov, who was exiled from Russia during the Bolshevik revolution, joined the French resistance during the Nazi occupation and later served on the faculty of the St. Sergius Institute in Paris. Pramuk points to Evdokimov as an important influence on Merton’s writing throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Poignantly, Pramuk looks to Merton’s prefatory note to *Bread in the Wilderness*, in which Merton reflects on an image of *Le Devot Christ*, a much-venerated crucifix in a Southern France cathedral. Merton relates the image of the crucified to the victims of Hiroshima and Auschwitz – a connection that Pramuk relates to Evdokimov’s description of prayer as an “apocalyptic manifestation.” By his ability to discern the presence of Christ in the midst of suffering and catastrophe, Merton is what Pramuk describes as a “bearer of hope in an age of looming hopelessness.” Is there a witness more essential than this?

The relationship between Merton’s aesthetic sensibilities and his contemplative spirituality is also a focus of an article by **Matthew Kubisiak** entitled “Aesthetics, Contemplation and Zeal: The Function of Religious Art and Experience in *The Seven Storey Mountain*.” Kubisiak highlights Merton’s frequent discussions of religious art in his famous autobiography, whether the religious shrines and chapels he saw as a child in France, the churches he observed in Rome as a young adult, or a statue of the *pietà* at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Kubisiak suggests that Merton’s orientation toward religious art was influenced by both Catholic intellectuals such as Jacques Maritain as well as the pragmatist school of thought exemplified by the American philosopher John Dewey. Specifically, Kubisiak shows that Merton maintained that art’s function is not merely aesthetic, but also spiritual: it “attune[s] the soul to God.” This interpretation of Merton’s aesthetic spirituality informs an intriguing reflection by Kubisiak on the

influence of Merton's own art – *Seven Storey Mountain* in particular – on the spiritual lives of its readers.

Next, an article by **John Marshall**, entitled “Reading in the Dark: *Lectio Divina* and the *Chuang Tzu*,” explores Merton's engagement with contemplative practices that he encountered as he grew deeply engaged with Eastern spiritualities. While Marshall shows Merton to be almost dismissive of some rigid variations of sitting meditation, he argues that Merton eagerly embraced Eastern contemplative practices that centered on the reading of texts. Informed by the Christian practice of *lectio divina*, Merton exemplified what Marshall calls a “spirituality of reading.” For Merton, the experience of contemplation was often framed by a dialogue with a text and an author. Marshall focuses particularly on Merton's engagement with Chuang Tzu, arguing that his development of an “ecumenical contemplative practice” focused on deep, reflective engagement with texts served as a paradigm for dialogue across religious lines more generally. Marshall highlights Merton's relationship with the scholar John Wu, who served as a kind of mentor to Merton in his exploration of Taoism. Under Wu's guidance, Merton completed his English interpretation of Chuang Tzu's writings, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*,<sup>3</sup> earning him Wu's profound affirmation: “I have come to the conclusion that you and Chuang Tzu are one.”

Further exploring Merton's relationship to Eastern spiritualities, **Benjamin Crace**'s article “The Book of Transformations: Merton and the *I Ching*” offers a fascinating examination of Merton's engagement with the *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese divination manual with origins tracing to around 1000 BCE. The *I Ching* was picked up by a number of counter-culture figures in the 1950s and 1960s, including Ken Kesey, Bob Dylan, George Harrison – and Thomas Merton. Drawing on Merton's notebooks, journals and correspondence, Crace argues that Merton consulted the *I Ching* principally as a tool of psychoanalysis and vocational discernment (related to his ongoing temptations to leave Gethsemani for other hermitage possibilities). Additionally, his engagement with the *I Ching* foreshadows – and likely influenced – his exploration of Asian religious and philosophical traditions during the later years of his life.

A reader familiar with past volumes of *The Merton Annual* may by this point have noticed that the articles collected here are focused principally on Merton's work on spirituality, aesthetics and inter-religious dialogue. Atypically, we do not have original articles on familiar areas of Merton's political and social criticism, such as racism, technology or war and peace. However, an article by **Megan McDonald Way** takes a fresh look

3. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).

at previously under-examined implications of Merton's thought for the field of economics. Entitled "Applying Thomas Merton's Wisdom to the Undergraduate Economics Classroom," Way's article shows how Merton's views on freedom, individualism and the instrumentalizing tendencies of mass society can ground fundamental critiques of economic paradigms that are often taken for granted – particularly in economics instruction at the college level. Way draws on these insights from Merton to formulate constructive suggestions for how economics pedagogy might evolve to reflect these critiques and even to become a site of contemplative reflection. This may be a tall order for the discipline of the invisible hand, *homo economicus* and Milton Friedman, but Way's article suggests fruitful avenues of reflection and conversation, showing yet again the continued relevance of Merton's spiritual writing and social analysis.

The articles section of this volume concludes with a major contribution by a pillar of the community of Merton scholars, **Patrick F. O'Connell**. O'Connell's article traces the development of a unique and fascinating work within the Merton corpus: his only published work in dramatic form, entitled *The Tower of Babel: A Morality*. The work was first published in *Jubilee* magazine in 1955 and was later performed in a condensed and adapted form on *The Catholic Hour* on NBC in that same year. Its genesis lies in a request from composer Paul Hindemith, in 1953, that Merton compose some text that Hindemith might set to music. O'Connell shows that while the collaboration with Hindemith was not ultimately realized, the invitation prompted Merton to return to writing poetry. Moreover, O'Connell identifies four distinct "phases of development" that the project underwent in those intervening years, in which Merton adopted the myth of the Tower of Babel as a lens for a critique of distortions of language in a technologized society. Through a close reading of each iteration of Merton's work, O'Connell brings to life not only the texts themselves, but also the growth and progression of Merton's authorial perspective in the process. The article is accompanied, in an appendix, by the text of a previously unpublished earlier version of the work, completed in 1953 and entitled "Tower of Babel: An Oratorio." When the collaboration with Hindemith did not go forward, Merton eventually developed this text into the finished product some years later. We are proud to make this piece of the historical record publicly available for the first time, and to do so as a complement to O'Connell's careful and thorough analysis of the process by which *The Tower of Babel* came to be.

The remainder of this volume includes a deft and comprehensive bibliographic review of recent publications by and about Merton, as well as a slate of dedicated reviews of recent books.

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In Ilia Delio's article in this volume, she employs a term (originated by her dissertation director, theologian Ewert Cousins) to describe Thomas Merton. Merton is, Delio argues, a "mutational figure," by which she means "one who embodies novel spiritual insights, and transforms the tradition from within." The breadth, depth and insight of the work collected here attest to the novelty and the insight of Merton's work – and to the transformations that his life continues to bring forth.