

An Invitation to Life: A Bibliographic Review of 2024

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But let us remember that the contemplative life is first of all *life*, and life implies openness, growth, development. To restrict the contemplative monk to one set of narrow horizons and esoteric concerns would be in fact to condemn him to spiritual and intellectual sterility.¹

Thomas Merton's invitation, located in the preface to *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, intentionally disrupts operative assumptions about contemplative life. Sixty years later, Merton's words supply a useful framework for showcasing select publications from 2024. Collectively, the works included in this bibliographic review encourage readers to consider Merton as a contemplative monk unrestricted by "narrow horizons and esoteric concerns." We begin with writings by Merton. Books focusing on or featuring Merton then follow. Articles comprise the final section of this review.

Books by Merton

By making available Merton's own writings, two books illustrate Merton's vision of "openness, growth, development" in the context of contemplative life. *Thomas Merton in California: The Redwoods Conferences and Letters*, edited and introduced by David M. Odorisio, sheds light on Merton's time with the women's Cistercian community of Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey in the final year of his life.² In the foreword Abbess Sr. Kathy DeVico, OCSO welcomes especially "those readers who are not scholars to imagine themselves as part of these retreat gatherings, anxious to hear what Merton has to say about contemplative prayer, about how God is manifested in our humanity" (xi). Douglas Christie further this sentiment in the preface, writing that "As readers and seekers, we are invited to listen carefully and attentively – to the silence, to words and thought arising from it, and to the deep currents of Spirit moving through it" (xvii). Odorisio's introduction (1-19) artfully situates Merton's writings in context: the first part of the book, "The Redwoods Conferences"

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) vii (subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text).

2. *Thomas Merton in California: The Redwoods Conferences and Letters*, edited and introduced by David M. Odorisio (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2024).

(29-380), includes Merton's lectures from May 1968 and October 1968; the second part, "The Letters" (383-425), features correspondence with several figures, including Sister Myriam Dardenne. This groundbreaking book is further enhanced by photographs and an appendix, "Four Days with Merton" (427-34), written by Gracie Jones. See the review by Ron Dart for more discussion of this award-winning book.³

Material from Merton's work *The Wisdom of the Desert*⁴ appears in *Mix a Little Affliction into Everything: A Practical Guide to the Desert Elders* by Nathan Wilson Ferrell.⁵ Ferrell, an Episcopal priest, offers readers a range of ways to engage with the sayings and stories of the desert ammas and abbas. The book draws largely on material from the alphabetical, anonymous and systematic collections published between 2012 and 2014, as translated by John Wortley (4). Positioned in this way, *The Wisdom of the Desert* contributes to the monastic tradition of spiritual guidance. In the introduction, Ferrell writes: "So I invite you, dear reader, to explore these texts by playing with them, by trying them on for size, by experimenting with them. They are meant to impact and change your life. The wisdom contained in them will not make much of a difference in our contemporary world unless we find ways to apply it to our actual lives" (4).

Books Focusing on or Featuring Merton

Engagement with Merton's life and thought is the focus of attention in *Dialogos, Puentes, Encuentros: La Vigencia de Thomas Merton*, edited by Marcela Maria Raggio.⁶ The book – *Dialogues, Bridges, Encounters: The Validity of Thomas Merton* in English translation – consists of papers presented at the Second Argentine Conference on Thomas Merton, an international virtual gathering sponsored by the National University of Cuyo in Argentina, on September 23-24, 2021.⁷ Encapsulating the conference theme, Raggio explains that "the narrative thread we have thought for this book is related to the idea of dialogue which stems from

3. See also Ellyn Crutcher, "Fresh Encounters with a Real Christian," *The Merton Seasonal* 49.1 (Spring 2024) 39-43.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960).

5. Nathan Wilson Ferrell, *Mix a Little Affliction into Everything: A Practical Guide to the Desert Elders* (independently published, 2024); for material from Merton see 28-37.

6. Marcela Maria Raggio, *Dialogos, Puentes, Encuentros: La Vigencia de Thomas Merton* (Mendoza, Argentina: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras de la Universidad Nacional de Cuyo, 2024).

7. For conference information see: <https://ffyl.uncuyo.edu.ar/segundas-jornadas-en-homenaje-a-thomas-merton>.

Merton the mystic, poet, contemplative photographer, correspondent and participant in ecumenical and cross-cultural dialogue” (11). Mark Meade, a conference participant and chapter contributor, reviews this book for *The Merton Annual*.

Several other books featuring Merton’s life and writings highlight sites of “openness, growth, development.” Aaron K. Kerr situates Merton’s “subversion and sense of alienation from the mainstream” (54) seamlessly in the context of beat culture in “The Music Never Stops,” the third chapter of the volume *Sacred Rhetoric: Discourses in Identity and Meaning*.⁸ Kerr offers comparative considerations of Merton and Neal Cassady, discusses Merton’s correspondence with Napoleon Chow and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and considers the nonviolent direct action of students at Columbia University in 1968. Sheona Beaumont gives attention to Merton’s artistic endeavors by positioning him alongside other photographers in *The Bible in Photography: Index, Icon, Tableau, Vision*.⁹ Beaumont writes that “Photographic practice itself came to stand for a mindfulness informed by faith, a habit of looking shaped by Merton’s knowledge of the Desert Fathers, and indeed also by Zen philosophy” (105). Merton’s photograph “Rocks and Tree Trunk c. 1967” occupies a full page (106). Jon Sweeney considers the timeliness of reading about Merton in “Monica Furlong’s *Thomas Merton and How to Ruin a Honeymoon*” (39-42), a chapter of his book *My Life in Seventeen Books: A Literary Memoir*.¹⁰ Finally, Michael W. Higgins situates Pope Francis’s identification of Merton as a moral prophet¹¹ in the broader context of connections between Merton and Latin America in *The Jesuit Disruptor: A Personal Portrait of Pope Francis*.¹² Higgins demonstrates alignments and elements of shared theological and spiritual vision with special attention to dialogue (76-84).

“Openness, growth, development” are likewise evident in the mo-

8. Aaron K. Kerr, “The Music Never Stops: Some Grateful Dead in the American Mystical Tradition,” in *Sacred Rhetoric: Discourses in Identity and Meaning* edited by David M. Barbee and Brent C. Sleasman (Vancouver, BC: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2024) 45-75.

9. Sheona Beaumont. *The Bible in Photography: Index, Icon, Tableau, Vision* (London: T&T Clark / Bloomsbury, 2024).

10. Jon M. Sweeney, *My Life in Seventeen Books: A Literary Memoir* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish, 2024) 39-42. For a review see David Belcastro, “Thoughts in Solitude,” *The Merton Seasonal* 49.4 (Winter 2024) 35-37.

11. See “Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015,” *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 16-23.

12. Michael W. Higgins, *The Jesuit Disruptor: A Personal Portrait of Pope Francis* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2024).

nastic life of Brother Paul Quenon. In *A Matter of the Heart: A Monk's Journal, 1970-2022*, Brother Paul shares journal entries spanning more than half a century of his monastic life at the Abbey of Gethsemani.¹³ The book is organized chronologically by decade, beginning in 1970, after Brother Paul made final vows in 1968 and Merton, his Novice Master, died (1). Brother Paul grounds his reflections in the context of monastic life and vocation. Writing of the day marking his sixtieth anniversary at Gethsemani, he acknowledges that "It is rewarding to still have a taste for daily life in the monastery. Rewarding to know it is right to spend the effort again today" (118). A later entry evinces the heart of such effort when he observes: "In silent prayer, by breathing I facilitate the Jesus Prayer. Now, the Jesus Prayer facilitates my breathing" (127). The book contains a foreword by Fenton Johnson and an afterword by James Finley who offers suggestive reading strategies (141-44). For more, see Michael McGregor's review in this volume of *The Merton Annual*.¹⁴

Commemoration also marks the two-volume set *The Scholar-Gipsy: Thrownness, Memoricide & the Great Tradition*. This *Liber Amicorum*, "Book of Friends" (ix), recognizes the work and influence of Merton scholar and university professor Ronald Samuel Dart.¹⁵ After remarks from the editors, Matthew Steem and Wayne Northey, the volumes commence with the words of Ron Dart and his wife, Karin Dart. Reflective writings from more than eighty authors, divided into four parts, follow: Academic Reflective, and Interdisciplinary Reflective (volume 1); Political Reflection, and Students Reflective (volume 2). Merton, identified as "integral to Ron's visions,"¹⁶ is discussed throughout both volumes. Contributors George A. Dunn and Xu Xiaoyan provide a formal review in the present volume.

Friendship – initiated in dialogue about Merton – also grounds *All My Eyes See: The Artistic Vocation of Fr. William Hart McNichols* by Christopher Pramuk and William Hart McNichols.¹⁷ In the introduction, titled "Opening the Eyes of the Heart," Pramuk writes:

13. Brother Paul Quenon, OCSO. *A Matter of the Heart: A Monk's Journal, 1970-2022* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish, 2024).

14. See also Megan Way, "Living the General Dance at Gethsemani," *The Merton Seasonal* 49.4 (Winter 2024) 38-39.

15. Matthew Steem and Wayne Northey, eds. *The Scholar-Gipsy: Thrownness, Memoricide & the Great Tradition*, 2 vols. (Abbotsford, BC: St. Macrina Press, 2024).

16. Robert Martens, "A Few Random Musings Regarding Ron Dart as He Retires" (1.593).

17. Christopher Pramuk and William Hart McNichols. *All My Eyes See: The Artistic Vocation of Fr. William Hart McNichols* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2024). The two were brought together by Fr. Bill's response to Pramuk's book, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009) (see 9).

Fr. Bill and I dare to hope . . . that through his art and in the natural dance of our conversations, something creative and perhaps unexpected will stir in the imagination of fellow pilgrims of all kinds – laypeople and religious, spiritual seekers, artists and scholars alike – anyone receptive to art’s power to sustain the journey of faith, especially when the road descends into loneliness and hardship. (2)

The book is structured in three sections: Part One: Childhood and Jesuit Beginnings; Part Two: Illustrator, Hospice Minister, Priest; Part Three: Iconographer: Friend of Prophets, Pilgrims, and Saints.

Merton’s life and writings make space for consideration of contemplative life in a pair of books. Cassidy Hall dialogues with Merton in *Queering Contemplation: Finding Queerness in the Roots and Future of Contemplative Spirituality*.¹⁸ Hall observes that “through engaging in the contemplative life, I’ve come to learn that contemplation makes me more queer – more curious, wild, weird, fierce, free, embodied, and present” (5-6). Hall’s book is reviewed by George Kehoe in this volume of *The Merton Annual*. Jason Brown also recognizes Merton’s influence in his ethnographic study, *Dwelling in the Wilderness: Modern Monks in the American West*.¹⁹ Brown considers the multi-faceted experience of monastic landscapes and offers suggestions for raising awareness about – and conscious involvement in – the activity of place-making in an appendix, titled “A Litany for Place-Making” (152-54). Aaron K. Kerr gives further attention to this book in the review section of the present volume.

Merton’s life and writings inform reflections on contemporary concerns in another set of books. With *Truth and Reconciliation: An Exploration of Leadership and Accountability within Divided Nations and Cyclic Ideologies*,²⁰ Thomas Malewitz aims to “offer a broader and creative opportunity for seeking an option for a new approach to wrestle with America’s pasts in ways that have not yet been attempted” (xiv). References to Merton appear throughout the book in discussions of the Eichmann trial, American civil rights and cultural critique. In *Fear and Faith: Hope and Wholeness in a Fractured World*,²¹ Daniel P. Horan ex-

18. “Breaking Up with Thomas Merton” in Cassidy Hall, *Queering Contemplation: Finding Queerness in the Roots and Future of Contemplative Spirituality* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2024).

19. Jason Brown’s ethnographic study, *Dwelling in the Wilderness: Modern Monks in the American West*. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 2024.

20. Thomas E. Malewitz, *Truth and Reconciliation: An Exploration of Leadership and Accountability within Divided Nations and Cyclic Ideologies* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2024).

21. Daniel P. Horan, *Fear and Faith: Hope and Wholeness in a Fractured World* (New York: Paulist Press, 2024).

plores a pervasive topic in biblical and contemporary contexts. Chapters center on foundational questions that engage the writings of a wide range of thinkers, including Merton, who also serves as a model and guide for consideration. Paul Dekar provides a review of this book for *The Merton Annual*. Merton's ecological consciousness is the subject of a chapter in *Green Saints for a Green Generation*, edited by Libby Osgood, CND.²² As Elizabeth A. Johnson observes in the foreword: "This book makes a distinctive contribution by lifting up a wide array of people identified as saints because of their commitment to care for the Earth and the peoples whose lives depend upon its flourishing" (xi). More information about this book can be found below in Jim Robinson's review.

Articles

Articles published in 2024 broadened horizons in Merton Studies. Various biographical matters are addressed in a range of articles. "A Monk's Habit: Thomas Merton's Other Affair: What Are We to Make of Thomas Merton's Relationship with Alcohol?" by James K. Hanna traces a narrative of Merton's alcohol use drawing primarily from comments in his *Journals*.²³ In "Why Thomas Merton was Suspicious of Psychedelic Drugs," Colm O'Shea draws on Aldous Huxley and Merton to explore psychedelic drugs and mystical experience.²⁴ "With Merton in California," by Andy Lord,²⁵ posits "that Merton encourages us to develop an ecological imagination that leads to spiritual practices, recognizing that this requires a renewal by the Holy Spirit that enables more active steps to protect and nourish the created environment" (23). In "Photographs Expose Thomas Merton Cover-up," Hugh Turley centers on the evidentiary value of the photographs taken by Father Celestine Say shortly after Merton's death.²⁶ Turley and David Martin address documentary evidence in "The Official Thai Reports on Thomas Merton's Death."²⁷

22. Libby Osgood, CND, ed., *Green Saints for a Green Generation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2024).

23. James K. Hanna, "A Monk's Habit: Thomas Merton's Other Affair: What Are We to Make of Thomas Merton's Relationship with Alcohol?" *Crisis Magazine* (18 Oct. 2024); available at: <https://crisismagazine.com/opinion/a-monks-habit-thomas-mertons-other-affair> (accessed 30 December 2024).

24. Colm O'Shea, "Why Thomas Merton was Suspicious of Psychedelic Drugs," *America* (3 May 2024); available at: <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2024/05/03/merton-huxley-ld-mysticism-247675> (accessed 30 December 2024).

25. Andy Lord, "With Merton in California." *The Merton Journal* 31.2 (Advent 2024) 23-30.

26. Hugh Turley, "Photographs Expose Thomas Merton Cover-up," *CovertAction Magazine* (8 July 2024); available at: <https://covertactionmagazine.com/2024/07/08/photographs-expose-thomas-merton-murder-cover-up> (accessed 30 December 2024).

27. Hugh Turley and David Martin, "The Official Thai Reports on Thomas Merton's

Historical and theological matters also figure prominently in articles published in 2024. Matthew J. Milliner reconsiders Merton's engagement with Buddhism and his epiphany at Polonnaruwa, in "Hive Mind: Alan Watts, Thomas Merton, and the Church of the East."²⁸ Daniel P. Horan addresses Merton's contributions to a supralapsarian Christology with special attention to ethical implications in "The Humble God of Thomas Merton: Christ, *Kenosis*, and Salvation in the General Dance."²⁹ Paul M. Pearson explores Merton's interpretation and application of the *Rule of St. Benedict* as a document centered on formation – individual and communal – for all members of the monastic community in "Dancing with St. Benedict: Thomas Merton's Embrace of the *Rule of St. Benedict*."³⁰ Patrick F. O'Connell examines Merton's study of twelfth-century Chartres in "The Red Wheel, Bloody Rain and a Need for Chalk: The School of Chartres in the Poetry of Thomas Merton."³¹

Political and social concerns are the central focus of a pair of articles. In "Merton – The 'Political' Monk,"³² Gerry McFlynn reviews some of Merton's writings after 1960 that illuminate his positions on select social issues and closes with contemporary considerations. McFlynn observes that "Merton's concern with political oppression, racial violence and nuclear war, was part and parcel of his understanding of theology as resistance and critique, rather than as support for the ideology of the existing order" (36-37). In "Thomas Merton on US Militarism,"³³ published before the 2024 national presidential election, Anthony Donovan presents Merton's actions and words against US militarism.

Connections between Merton and other figures shape several articles, including two by Mary Frances Coady. In "The Role of a Prophet: Thomas Merton and Alfred Delp," Coady argues that Merton's writing of the introduction to *In the Face of Death*, an English translation of *Im*

Death," *Catholic Historical Review* 110.2 (Spring 2024) 384-96.

28. Matthew J. Milliner, "Hive Mind: Alan Watts, Thomas Merton, and the Church of the East," *The Hedgehog Review* 26.3 (Fall 2024) 132-41.

29. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, "The Humble God of Thomas Merton: Christ, *Kenosis*, and Salvation in the General Dance," *The Merton Journal* 31.1 (Easter 2024) 22-31.

30. Paul M. Pearson, "Dancing with St. Benedict: Thomas Merton's Embrace of the *Rule of St. Benedict*," *The Merton Journal* 31.2 (Advent 2024) 9-22.

31. Patrick F. O'Connell, "The Red Wheel, Bloody Rain and a Need for Chalk: The School of Chartres in the Poetry of Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 59.2 (2024) 205-32.

32. Gerry McFlynn, "Merton – The 'Political' Monk," *The Merton Journal* 31.1 (Easter 2024) 34-39.

33. Anthony Donovan, "Thomas Merton on US Militarism," *Pressenza* (27 Sept. 2024); available at: <https://www.pressenza.com/2024/09/thomas-merton-on-us-militarism> (accessed 30 December 2024).

Angesicht des Todes by Fr. Alfred Delp, provided him with an important dialogue partner.³⁴ In “Thomas Merton and Evelyn Waugh: *Elected Silence* at 75,” Coady considers Evelyn Waugh’s perspectives on Merton during his editorial work on *Elected Silence* (1949), the British version of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), and *The Waters of Silence* (1950), the British version of *The Waters of Siloe* (1949).³⁵

Connections also organize a slate of other articles. Kerri Fox presents evidence for Merton’s consideration of the life and teachings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, with special attention to spiritual poverty, in “‘A totally extraordinary saint’: A meditation on St Thérèse of Lisieux’s influence on Thomas Merton.”³⁶ Rebecca Gould demonstrates how “Both the content of Merton’s scholarship on Blake as well as his narrative of self in relation to Blake reveal his nascent faith identity” (4) in “Art and Selfhood: Thomas Merton and William Blake.”³⁷ Susanne Jennings attends to Merton’s year at Cambridge, in 1933, in “Then & Now: Thomas Merton and Cambridge.”³⁸ Jennings gathers comparative information in interviews with five Cambridge chaplaincy professionals, proposing that “Had Merton had recourse in the early 1930s to today’s chaplaincy and student welfare network at Cambridge, things may arguably have worked out more favourably for him” (61). Marcela Maria Raggio “focuses on the letters exchanged between Thomas Merton and Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal” (138) in “Religion and Cultural Networks: Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal.”³⁹ Raggio writes that “Special attention is paid to the religious view of the world manifested in the texts, as expressions of a Christian cosmovision that permeates the literary and intellectual relations” (138). Anthony Purvis juxtaposes the act of “contemplatively visualis[ing]” (65) in the busy ordinariness of city life as reflected in Merton’s works and in Wim Wenders’ film *Perfect Days* (2023), in the article, “In Search of *Perfect Days*: Contemplation as Documentary

34. Mary Frances Coady, “The Role of a Prophet: Thomas Merton and Alfred Delp,” *The Merton Journal* 31.1 (Easter 2024) 17-21.

35. Mary Frances Coady, “Thomas Merton and Evelyn Waugh: *Elected Silence* at 75,” *The Merton Journal* 31.2 (Advent 2024) 3-21.

36. Kerri Fox, “‘A Totally Extraordinary Saint’: A Meditation on St Thérèse of Lisieux’s Influence on Thomas Merton,” *The Merton Journal* 31.2 (Advent 2024) 42-46.

37. Rebecca Gould, “Art and Selfhood: Thomas Merton and William Blake,” *The Merton Journal* 31.1 (Easter 2024) 3-13.

38. Susanne Jennings, “Then & Now: Thomas Merton and Cambridge,” *The Merton Journal* 31.2 (Advent 2024) 47-62.

39. Marcela Maria Raggio, “Religion and Cultural Networks: Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal,” *Abdal: La Revista de la Fundacion Ernesto Cardenal* 2 (Julio 2024) 137-49.

Practice.”⁴⁰ Purvis shows that “For Merton, as for Wenders, the medium is not the message. Rather, for both men, the mediation is the message, and the message is communion” (71). Lastly, Paul Pynkoski reviews three publications, each by a Merton scholar – Gordon Oyer (2021), Patrick O’Connell (2022) and David Odorisio (2024) – that illumine evolution in Merton’s relationships with friends as evident in his letters and conferences – in “Review Essay: An Apostolate of Friendship: Recent Publications on the Letters and Conferences of Thomas Merton.”⁴¹ As Merton himself noted:

There are many other concerns appropriate to an age of transition and crisis, of war and racial conflict, of technology and expansion. Above all, there are the day-to-day impressions, the simple conjectures, of a man in his own world with its own challenges. It is a monastic world, and doubtless strange to those who have no experience of any such thing. Yet it is, I think, open to the life and experience of the greater, more troubled, and more vocal world beyond the cloister. (*CGB* vi-vii)

40. Anthony Purvis, “In Search of *Perfect Days*: Contemplation as Documentary Practice,” *The Merton Journal* 31.2 (Advent 2024) 64-73.

41. Paul Pynkoski, “Review Essay: An Apostolate of Friendship: Recent Publications on the Letters and Conferences of Thomas Merton,” *The Journal of Social Encounters* 8.1 (2024) 216-28.