

Centering on Prayer

Review of
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Reviewed by **Colleen O’Sullivan, RSJ**

Victor A. Kramer’s introduction to the latest volume of *The Merton Annual* is entitled “To Pray Contemplatively is to Work Mysteriously toward the Center” (7-15). This title expresses the purpose and thematic content of the 2007 *Annual*, which examines a multitude of aspects and dimensions of prayer. The articles draw readers to an understanding of prayer and its necessity, to the mystery of God and relationship as it is played out in ordinary living, and to spirituality’s relationship with culture and society, both Western and other. The interviews following the major essays (265-98) are illustrative of the lives of those who saw contemplation as essential to living whether they called it by that name or by another name.

In many ways *The Merton Annual* crosses the boundaries of a number of genres: spirituality, sociology, psychology. All articles, however, are in some way connected to the necessity of prayer and are about the movement towards the center of the self and towards the center of creation. The process of being drawn to the center and the Center itself constitute the mystery. The writers remind us that Thomas Merton indicates this in much of his work. In “Rain and the Rhinoceros” Merton describes the absolute simplicity of rain which can never be other than itself. How this happens within the movement and moment of creation is mystery.

Within the journal those authors who write specifically of prayer do so in a variety of ways. They take the original instruction given to Merton by Dom Frederic Dunne to write of contemplation seriously. Together they expand the connections and scope of the monk’s writings. This is a difficult task as everything was grist to Merton’s pen as he understood that nothing needs be untouched by prayer – this mystery is beyond the reductionism of science Kramer speaks of in his opening word and which must communicate with itself on its own terms: “contemplative prayer confronts the knowledge of unknowability” (7). For science there is no such thing as unknowability. Everything in the last analysis is capable of being known. For those with a sense of faith there is always that which cannot be known: the mystery beyond. Kramer’s introduction thus establishes the thesis on which the *Annual* rests: life draws us irrevocably to the Center whether it is reached through

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contemplation or by another path. Taking the path of contemplation involves darkness, anguish and challenges but it is ultimately healing. Kramer cites William Johnston that it is through this healing “of personal fears and anxieties that each person moves towards a healing of self and paradoxically becomes more ‘individuated’ and more able to pray” (11). Implicit in such a healing is the healing of the world in which we live.

“Authentic Identity is Prayerful Existence” (16-24) includes the transcript of Merton’s lecture “Prayer and Identity” and begins with the fundamental premise forming the basis of Merton’s understanding of the authentic self: “we belong to God, and we want to belong to God, and we want to affirm our belonging to God” (17). This personal call is affirmed in a variety of ways in many of the essays, including Glenn Crider’s introduction to the transcript (16). The “is” Merton talks of resolves the self-contradictory nature of the heart when it is pulled in many directions as it is by society today. The reiteration of this personal call to authentic identity is a voice which needs to be heard in our time when the inauthentic appears to have flooded world leadership in so many areas and to have filtered through to the grass roots of societies.

Today’s society and culture are also challenged in other essays. Terrence Kardong in his exploration of Benedict’s *Rule* (25-37) emphasizes the power and nature of interiority – again an aspect of living which enriches society but is often devalued by an extroverted culture. Kathy Hoffman (38-61) brings the power of the psalms as prayer into the twenty-first century and challenges the way in which modern translations soften the edges of the relationship the psalmist had with Yahweh. They were comfortable – and angry enough – to speak to God out of their own sense of pain and outrage as to what was happening to their world. Their anguish surfaced from the contemplative center of their relationship with God. The essay implicitly asks the question from where does the world’s anguish surface now and what is our twenty-first-century response to such anguish? Merton himself was immersed in the psalms, “the poetry of the choir.” They articulated for him his own confusion and disorientation, his struggle to allow the process of mystery to be sustained in his own life. Readers can identify and reflect on the process as it occurs in their lives as they come to terms with the ideas contained in Hoffmann’s essay. The author’s reference to Walter Brueggemann explains the core of her thesis and also indicates the value of inter-faith conversation begun by people such as Merton – a conversation which has expanded in our own day: “Brueggemann agrees that a faith which attempts to bring even the most painful experiences to speech and use those experiences as a basis for conversation with God is a ‘transformed faith,’ which demonstrates a recognition of God’s presence in even the darkest moments of human existence” (55). The psalms are still an authentic way to the heart of mystery.

Keith Egan’s critique of Merton’s work *The Ascent to Truth* (62-78) and his approach to John of the Cross has a place in this collection of essays as it points to the evolution of Merton’s thought. Merton’s move from ascetical theology to an understanding of the significance of personal spiritual experience and the personal belief in that experience as the heart of the contemplative life becomes clearer as the article unfolds. It is true that the scholastic movement attracted Merton who, tongue in cheek perhaps, believed he had a medieval mind. His affection for Jacques and Raissa Maritain may also have influenced his belief in Maritain’s approach to art and philosophy. The author of this essay, however, while critiquing the inaccuracies of the schoolmen and Merton in some areas of theology, points out that the “loving attentiveness” of John of the Cross was ultimately the same goal

as Merton's and Egan says that Merton democratized contemplation and made accessible what had seemed reserved to the few – no mean feat!

E. Glenn Hinson (79-92) and Richard J. Hauser (93-108) focus on the *Spiritual Exercises* and Ignatian spirituality as a whole – the kataphatic way of contemplation. Hinson deals with the nature of imagination as understood in that spirituality. Both the Puritan Richard Baxter and St. Ignatius Loyola used the imagination as a pathway to meditation and thence to contemplation. They realized meditation is not just a work of understanding and memory but of the heart. Imagination is the key to the heart and to entering into mystery. Hauser's understanding of this truth is expressed from a psychological viewpoint via his personal journey. The author's coming to prayer brought him into a sense of brotherhood with both Ignatius and Merton, "seeking God in daily lives, and in creation – in all things" (107). Both essays are valuable because our century needs to reawaken to the knowledge that God can be discovered anew in daily existence.

Bonnie Thurston (109-22) has written much about prayer and about Thomas Merton's approach to prayer. Her summary of Merton's prayer as he described it to the Muslim scholar Abdul Aziz is a succinct epitome of the contemplative way: "(1) God is with us; (2) prayer is a gift and as such cannot really be taught; (3) in prayer it is absolutely crucial to be present – we start where we are; (4) two fundamental and relatively common difficulties in prayer are distractions and self-consciousness; (5) intentionally and potentially, all of life is prayer" (114). In an age of self-consciousness how many would really be aware that self-consciousness in itself is a barrier to prayer and thus to contemplation? Thurston's words echo Merton's invitation to forget ourselves and see all of life as a whole. We are always spiritual but this fact can be lost in the mirage of self-deception the constant stream of images and words thrust at us. Self-deception can hide the fact that at times we do not wish to pray.

David Belcastro's "Praying the Questions" (123-50) continues this conversation and as Thurston moves into the realms of Islam so Belcastro also straddles cultures and invites the reader to be aware of the trickster. The trickster is one who keeps individuals locked into a narrow unimaginative world. His article highlights the fact that the trickster acts in so many ways through the electronic media. Cynthia Bourgeault (151-63) and Emile Farge (164-84) also break down the boundaries between cultures and encourage the crossing of borders and invite the reader to think and imagine in different ways.

A significant and valuable article which speaks to our time is Phillip Thompson's "Prayer in a High-tech World" (185-202). Thompson writes sensitively and with expertise of his subject. He describes the tsunami of communication available through the electronic media and the ambivalence of Merton towards this power. Merton's ironic prayer to a computer highlights this ambivalence. But Merton's contemplation also made him a realist – Parker Palmer's understanding of contemplation is the movement towards anything that removes illusions from life. Merton knew that technology, once born, would not fade away or die. We must learn to develop a mental ecology compatible with the contemplative life (192). Merton abhorred a mentality of productivity and the emphasis on efficiency which dominates economic activity. In such a milieu prayer will always seem inefficient and unproductive. The author encourages a new ecological movement towards alternative activities which are contemplative in nature not outer-focused only. Such alternatives move each person towards their own center and impel the confrontation with this age's need for reclaiming *intellectus*

– the ability simply to look and be receptive to a more profound vision that encompasses temporal and spiritual realities (196).

The *Annual* also includes a reprint of an article by Roger Corless (206-24), who died recently, which confronts the Christian exploration of non-Christian religion and questions where such an exploration might lead those willing to become involved in such research. Merton led in this area in the pioneer days of such investigation.

With Malgorzata Poks (225-42) the reader is drawn further into a meeting of strangers – and a further understanding of the cultural norms which separate those in the Americas from each other. Merton could address fellow writers and poets with the words: “You are in Rio, you see other skies than I and hear different harmonies and rhythms, but we seek the same innocence” (237). This innocence embraces the Mystery at the world’s Center. Robert Leigh Davis’ exploration of Merton’s *Cables to the Ace* (243-54) highlights the alienation Merton saw in the world within and outside the monastery. The search to “recover . . . ancient roots in dream, vision, and the unconscious” (249) through poetry and spirituality is itself alien to many in the post-modern world – a world that Thompson ironically informs the reader of the *Annual* no longer reads books but depends on mass media for information and entertainment and which is exploitative through its own electronic cables – or even without them in a wireless world.

The interviews, as noted above, and the book reviews included (299-398) are enlightening and offer scope for further study of the many aspects of spirituality touched on by the authors and by Merton in his writings.

So what does *The Merton Annual* offer to its readers? the academic excellence of well-researched articles written by men and women who reveal themselves in their work as authentic thinkers and who are unafraid to enter into mystery as it reveals itself or as it waits to be uncovered in their social and cultural milieu. It provides an awareness that there is a spiritual realm universally open to all. Within its pages there is an understanding that even in the post-modern world spirituality has its place and is its own reality. It needs no vindication or excuse. Some articles will appeal to the general public more than others. Articles such as that on Benedictine spirituality are more specific than ones such as Thompson’s on prayer and the high-tech world but both will have an audience and both challenge the reader to explore areas they may not have thought of before. This volume of *The Merton Annual* illuminates facets of thought, prayer and writings of one of the great spiritual leaders of the modern era and encourages scholarship and research in that most profound area of all – contemplation. As such it seems that the *Annual* continues to have a significant contribution to make to Merton scholarship and to the understanding of contemplation in this first decade of the twenty-first century.