

Ecumenical Bridge to an Integrated Life

Review of

Merton & the Protestant Tradition

Edited by William Oliver Paulsell

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Reviewed by **William D. Apel**

Some books are meant to be read at least twice. *Merton & the Protestant Tradition* is one of them. This well-written and highly informative book represents the sixth volume of Fons Vitae's superb series for the study of world religious traditions from the perspective of Thomas Merton's life and writings. Thoughtfully edited by William Oliver Paulsell, it is divided into two equal parts. The first half, written by the editor himself, reports on what he calls "Merton's evolving attitude toward Protestants" (xiii). The second half "consists of articles by Protestants who describe the kinds of influence Merton has had on them" (xiv). As I was raised by a Methodist father and a Catholic mother, this book caught my attention right away. I have sought for some time to unite these two aspects of my religious heritage. Each of the writers in *Merton & the Protestant Tradition* has helped me in different ways to advance further down that path. They have done this for me both intellectually and spiritually. Indeed, this sixth volume of the Fons Vitae series has been written with "head and heart" – something many Merton readers will welcome.

The first section of the book is divided into five parts, carefully arranged according to five topics which Paulsell believes will provide a well-rounded account of Merton's evolving view of Protestants: "Books," "Journals," "Letters," "Merton and the Theologians" and "Ecumenical Visits." I will comment on the two topics which may contain some of Paulsell's best work – Merton's letters and his reading of Protestant theologians.

The "Letters" section begins with a discussion of the correspondence and friendship of Merton and A. M. Allchin. Their correspondence began in 1963 and lasted until shortly before Merton's death in December 1968. Allchin was an Anglican priest, librarian, cathedral canon and professor. Merton invited this young cleric to visit him at Gethsemani, which he did in 1967 and 1968. His second visit was most memorable. They were returning to Gethsemani from a visit to the remains of Pleasant Hill, an old Shaker village, when they heard news on the car radio of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis. Rather than return to the Abbey, Merton requested that they proceed immediately to nearby Bardstown, where an African-American friend, Colonel Hawk, was the proprietor of a local tavern. On their arrival, the three gathered in love and solidarity as they mourned the death of Dr. King. Someone took a picture of them seated at a table with a photo of

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John F. Kennedy on it (31). Thanks to Allchin, we have a picture of what true ecumenism was for Merton – a very personal, almost hidden moment in time. The kingdom of God is at hand (a genuine piece of realized eschatology). Here sat an Anglican priest, a Trappist monk and a member of the African-American community brought together by a slain Baptist minister and civil rights leader. In his later years, I lunched with Fr. Allchin in the English countryside. He remembered this event with great clarity. It was a living memory, one that will never die – and we are the benefactors of its power and grace.

Glenn Hinson, an individual mentioned in Paulsell’s section on “Ecumenical Gatherings,” was also a key ecumenical Merton friend and correspondent. A Baptist pastor and professor, he was among the first Protestants to take his Baptist seminarians to meet with Merton at Gethsemani. On Merton’s invitation, he initiated a correspondence which lasted from 1962 until 1967. In this correspondence, we discover aspects of what ecumenical activity included for Merton. In several letters the topic of the war in Vietnam was mentioned. Both men publicly opposed this war as unjust and inhuman from its beginnings. Both found themselves to be a lonely voice within their religious traditions, Merton among most American Catholics and Hinson among most Southern Baptists. They were both chastised by members of their faith tradition. Sometimes to be ecumenical in spirit is to be prophetic in action. Several years ago, I visited with Glenn Hinson in his Louisville home. We talked together about Merton and Hinson’s time spent with him. As with Allchin, he remembered these events as if they were yesterday – living memories once again. God’s reign somehow peeked through from future glory into present reality. An emerging community of the Spirit was appearing. As we turn to the second half of the book, this same spiritual dynamic of Spirit seems to be in its witness as well.

There is no way to do full justice to each of the excellent articles in this half of the book. As in the first half, I will select portions of each author’s work, try to whet the reader’s appetite, and add some of my own thoughts, as I’m sure most of you as readers do, often in the book’s margins. This book will be all marked up as most good books are. We begin with “Thomas Merton’s Living Influence” by Stephane A. Paulsell, Harvard University professor and daughter of the editor. She starts with a personal remembrance, recalling the time when she opened her father’s tattered copy of *The Sign of Jonas* and writes that after the first few pages she “was hooked” (111). Beginning with her father, she remembers all those who had touched her life deeply and realized they were all people “who love him [Thomas Merton] and shared his commitments” (113). Paulsell acknowledges that she has learned much from Merton’s books, but has learned even more from his life. Then, she reasons one step beyond this and claims: “To encounter Merton is to encounter a universe of others – writers he loved, people with whom he corresponded, the monks by whose side he worked out his vocation in fear and trembling, frustration and joy” (118). In this one sentence, Paulsell has summed up what has been for so many others their experience as well. In addition, might it be that this “community of others” expands to include people who are not only Merton’s contemporaries, but many today that can be associated with Merton in very new ways?

The second of these articles is Stephen V. Springle’s “The Broken Silence of Thomas Merton.” One of its strengths is the attention he gives to the Trappist way of life undergirding all of Merton’s life and thought from the age of twenty-seven until his death at the age of fifty-three. The author notes that he was especially intrigued by the daily offices, especially compline, the beauty

of which almost overwhelmed him. But its spiritual impact upon him is something that surprised him, as nothing in his own Baptist upbringing had prepared him for something like this. Springle's experiences at Gethsemani began when he was a young man in college. In reference to compline he writes: "I could not explain nor reason away the import of the strain of 'Hail Holy Queen' on my soul" (120). That is quite a statement coming from any Baptist! However, in this new experience, there came to be a theological breakthrough for Springle. He realized, "what I encountered . . . was my first conscious tryst with the Divine Feminine" (120). Merton would have applauded this awakening to another way of encountering Sacred Reality. For the very first time Springle had experienced the living presence of the Holy Queen, the Divine Feminine. Ironically, she had been there all the time, and will be for all eternity. There is so much more to be discovered in Springle's essay – the discussion of the importance of silence, going into the desert long enough to find one's self. But then, as Merton taught, Springle knew we must come out the other side, break the silence for the love of others, for social justice, and to end racism and all war – no small order but anything less is a denial of the full life to which Christ calls us.

Libby Falk Jones, the third Protestant respondent, contributes a beautifully written, highly intuitive essay entitled "Thomas Merton: Signposts on a Continuing Journey." The reflections of this poet and professor consist of a series of journal entries, dated between 1995 and 2016. They are not arranged chronologically but rather according to a pattern of some of the continuing signposts mentioned in the article's subtitle. Her first short comment, from a journal entry of March 2016, opens by noting: "Today I'm walking in the woods with Thomas Merton" (127). She continues, "I don't exactly envisage him tromping along by my side in his work clothes and boots, camera swinging from a sturdy strap around his neck. But I see through his eyes" (127). Her affirmation that she "sees through his eyes" reminds us of something Merton encouraged in his readers – see, really see! This is a really important signpost for her. "Stop looking . . . and begin seeing." She hears Merton's voice ringing in her head. "Stop looking because looking means that you have something in mind for your eye to find. . . . But seeing is being open and receptive to what comes to the eye." This passage, we are told, comes from a piece of Merton's writings that can be found at the Thomas Merton Center (127); and isn't it challenging? This is a notion that has been so important to Jones. She asks, "How could Merton have read my mind?" (127). Many times something has been put into words by Merton that causes others to say, "Yes, that's it!" He has that gift; he helps identify signposts along the way for numerous of his readers (including this one). Thanks are due to Libby Falk Jones for awakening us to Merton's wisdom once again. For Jones this matter of seeing, really seeing, is what I would call a kind of optic spirituality, and that has little to do with our physical seeing but everything to do with our mystical sight. As St. Benedict would say, it is seeing with the eye of the heart. Well, I have responded to only one of Jones' numerous entries. The others are very much worth reading and rereading. I will end where Jones ends her essay, with these words of gratitude: "I know that, as I work to deepen my ways of being in the world, my ways of seeing the world's beauty and mystery, my ways of working with word and image, I will continue to walk with Merton" (136).

The next article, by Brian L. Cole, is the shortest in the group of nine, but don't be fooled by its brevity. It draws very close to the center of Merton's spirituality. The author identifies the two great gifts from Merton that have influenced him as *silence* and *conversation*. Cole's has been an

arduous journey, from his life as a conservative Baptist to that of an Anglican priest! His journey must have included many silent moments alone and numerous conversations with others along the way. Cole has understood the path he chose in life as a movement toward wholeness, becoming a more complete person in his dedication to God and ministry to others. His account of spiritual transformation is not about how the Anglican way is more fulfilling than that of a Baptist life. Rather, as with Merton, it is all about the importance of genuine silence and conversation for the soul no matter what religious tradition informs the way of life chosen, whether it be Baptist or Anglican or no religious tradition at all. It is about discovering that “hidden wholeness” that God has placed within every human being. In other words, this movement toward wholeness is rooted in God. Cole has a very insightful section in his essay in which he writes about those people who have influenced his journey. In addition to Merton, he pays tribute to Rumi and to the Quakers. Places are also important for Cole’s movement toward wholeness. The experiences of Gethsemani and India have been invaluable components of his journey. All these people and places are teachers for Cole, teachers to balance life with silence and conversation. This indeed is the wholeness that has come into his consciousness thanks most especially to Thomas Merton. In looking back on his life and its many changes, Cole realizes that if his father were still alive he might not fully understand all the changes in his son. How many have thought the same thing in relation to a father or mother? And the question can also be asked in a reverse fashion. Influenced by Merton, how might we now look at our mother or father? Some of Merton’s reflections on his father Owen have helped me to see my departed father in an even clearer light. Pondering his question of how his father might look at him now, Cole decides he would not try to explain all the changes in words. Instead, he would put his father in the car and drive from his Lexington home to Gethsemani “where we would not need to speak in order to understand each other, and to love each other.” Cole’s last line in his essay simply says, “Thomas Merton taught me this” (142).

The fifth of the Protestant responses is from Bill Leonard, entitled “Thomas Merton: The Stamp of Grace.” This lifelong Baptist writes that his journey with Merton began in earnest when he moved to Louisville and became a member of the faculty at Southern Baptist Seminary. There he began his walk alongside senior members of the faculty like Glenn Hinson and Dale Moody who had known Thomas Merton “reasonably well” (144). However, according to Leonard it was Father Clyde Crews, a professor of Bellarmine University, who first took him to Gethsemani “and got me hosted inside the monastery, rising at 2:00 a.m. to fight the forces of darkness, keep vigil and shivering with the Trappists in the stone-cold church” (144). That, Leonard supposes, is “as close to Thomas Merton as I guess I can get in this world” (145). Yet there is another kind of closeness Leonard feels with Merton. It is expressed by Merton himself, as quoted from *The Sign of Jonas*: “One thing I will say: that *the stamp of grace* is on the memory of yesterday” (143). Merton was referring to the day of his profession of vows, and his sense of a deep union with the other monks. This stamp of grace, or the mark of God’s grace upon humankind, is language not at all unfamiliar to many Protestants. In fact, in my Methodist tradition it is sometimes said that grace is the major doctrine of Christianity – everything begins and ends with God’s relentless grace. Leonard has felt this stamp of grace in his own life and Thomas Merton has placed it there. In Leonard’s words, “Almost seventy years later [after Merton’s profession of his solemn vows], Thomas Merton has placed a profound *stamp of grace* on my own memory, not because I knew him personally, but because his writings have

contributed extensively to my own spiritual formation” (143). Not until that move to Louisville and the Gethsemani experience did it begin to happen in a significant way – but happen it did! For Leonard, it was nothing short of “God’s gracious favor” that Merton was understood to have blessed his entire life. He thought he was undeserving of it, and is open with his readers in sharing the many reasons that is so. This grace in its most positive and redeeming sense was, in Leonard’s words, “the presence of Christ within the individuals.” But the stamp of grace does not stop there. It also has to do with our “collective journey” (148). In other words, what about the outward journey? Leonard suggests that the Christians might do well today “to revisit Merton and grace at this moment in American history” (145). The task set out before us is prophetically stated. In decisive fashion, Leonard asks, “Can the work of a Trappist monk, dead for almost half a century, continue to inform and form? Can his response to questions of peace and war . . . help us address war as a constancy in American life? Does his approach to something now called ‘spirituality’ . . . Is Merton still a viable guide in the quest for the *stamp of grace*?” (145). This is but a taste of Leonard’s essay, which explores much more deeply the theme of Merton and grace, the stamp of grace, related to how then to live alone and in community, how to unite the inner and outer, to unite the spiritual and the worldly. Leonard challenges the reader and asks questions which lead to other questions. Sound familiar?

The sixth of the Protestant writers, Gary Hall, begins his article by placing the reader right in the middle of a Catholic/Protestant ecumenical dilemma he has encountered. In “Heart to Heart,” Hall, a presbyter in the British Methodist Church, writes of the time he was a retreat speaker at “a gathering of Catholic missionaries” (152). At the end of the retreat when the Eucharist was about to be celebrated, Hall discreetly stepped back. To Hall’s surprise, the celebrants invited Hall to join in. “You’re one of us aren’t you?” This caused Hall to think to himself, “Of course I was and am but thank God for those with the grace to risk saying as much, and acting accordingly” (152). Hall wonders how this event, usually symbolic of a Catholic/Protestant dualism, could suddenly be overcome, at least for a moment. He thinks about his reading of Merton and his insistence about overcoming dualisms. Does this include the existence of the divide at the table of Christ? He has hope for change, based on God’s grace, and the hard work of love. What is possible are the little steps to unity, like what he experienced on retreat with the Catholic missionaries. This is what Merton looked forward to – a little faith like the mustard seed does grow after all. Hall also looks back into his own Methodist tradition and the work of John Wesley. He quotes a passage from Wesley that suits well the issues of dualisms and the need for greater unity, taken from his sermon on the Catholic spirit: “We will have our affiliations and particular congregations; but we will go on loving in the kingdom and patience of Jesus . . . rooted in the faith once delivered to the saints, and grounded in love” until we are “swallowed up in love forever and ever!” (160). Merton would have valued these words had he seen them, and Hall knew it!

The seventh article, by Alan Kolp, is yet another example of how reading Merton can cause significant changes in a person’s life. The author, a Quaker originally from rural Indiana, provides in “Thomas Merton: Son of a Quaker and Friend of Friends” an engaging account of how reading Merton led him to look back again into his own religious tradition. Kolp uses a bridge as his metaphor for crossing over from one religious tradition to another. His friend for the crossing is Thomas Merton. How many countless others have befriended the writings of Merton for a similar type of crossing – going over, coming back, and going over again. As Kolp reads Merton, his understanding

of his own faith tradition is enriched. It is fascinating to watch Kolp link Merton and Quakerism's George Fox as kindred spirits who are sometimes close to one another on their views of God and the consequences of those views. Kolp highlights one of his favorite quotes from Fox near the outset: "there is that of God in every person" (165). Everyone is precious in the eyes of God; there is that light of God within. Each person, therefore, has intrinsic worth and value. Kolp finds this theology of George Fox from the radical side of the Protestant reformation to be compatible with Merton's thoughts and experiences of God in the midst of the twentieth century. In a very creative set of paragraphs, he introduces a consideration of Merton's *point vierge* – this inner divine Reality of truth and wisdom in each human being – as akin to Fox's earlier conviction that the Holy One dwells deep within the recesses of the soul. It is a place untouched and reserved only for God. Kolp emphasizes with Fox that it is "the pure glory in us." It is deeper than any virtues or vices that are a part of the outer life. However, such an awareness of the Divine within has its outer consequences. The Quaker passion for peace and social justice is built on this way of experiencing God's inner presence and how such a recognition cannot confine God's love. It bursts forth from inmost interior Reality. Merton's insistence that there cannot be contemplation without compassion certainly is a crossing of the metaphorical bridge around which Kolp has fashioned his essay; and as he emphasizes, it is crossed from one side to another many times, from his Quaker ways to Merton's writings and teachings, and back again – always to the God who dwells within and without, to the life of prayer within and the life of just actions without.

The final two essays can be taken together as an excellent summary of what many of the other Protestant writers say in one way or another are Merton's major gifts to Protestants. James T. Baker and Justin D. Klassen simply refine some of the ideas that are a part of all these contributions. The first contribution is Merton himself, or as Baker puts it in his article's title, "The Enduring Presence of Thomas Merton." The second is an integrated life as stated in Klassen's title for his article: "Thomas Merton and the Integrated Life." Baker has the distinction of having written the first dissertation on Merton. He is also the only one of the Protestant respondents to have met Merton. Through his personal experience with Merton, Baker is able to provide a distinctive view of the monk of Gethsemani. As a chaplain and graduate student at Florida State University, his proposal to do a dissertation on Merton was approved by his doctoral committee, and through a mutual friend he was able to gain Merton's consent. Baker visited with Merton twice, once in 1967 and again in the late summer of 1968, only months before the monk's death. From the time Merton said "Okay, let's talk," until their final goodbye, Baker was taken by Merton's presence. When they were together they "talked a lot and laughed even more" (172-75); and Merton was fully present to the young graduate student. Merton's spirit of presence is something so many attest to after having met him. For so many others, that same spirit of presence comes through in the reading of his books and articles. Readers often say it is as if Merton is speaking directly to them. Baker, after Merton's death, published much of his dissertation in his book *Thomas Merton: Social Critic*. Some years later he wrote a play, *Under the Sign of the Waterbearer*, with Merton as the central figure. In doing so, Baker writes, "I had myself once more met and spent time with Merton. . . . So it is that Merton continued to appear and make his presence known to me" (178). Baker has become a part of a community of the spirit which finds Merton at its center, always pushing forward, crossing many boundaries, even death. Baker's assertion rings true. There is an enduring presence when Merton is remembered. It's not about his

many accomplishments as a writer, as a social critic, as a spiritual visionary – it’s about the man himself, the one who “talked a lot and laughed even more.”

In the final article, Justin D. Klassen writes of Merton and the integrated life. His opening sentence reads: “As in any religious writer, one should read Merton with a readiness to be exposed, challenged, and changed” (180). The “provocation” of Merton’s that Klassen finds “most insistent and helpful over the years is that of Christianity’s call to integration” (180). He borrows a phrase from Rowan Williams to express best what the Christian life is about – the possibility of an *integrated life*. This is not an empty slogan for Klassen. The implications of this integration of life means putting the broken parts back together – all the broken parts. Klassen’s analysis of Christianity’s failure to fully integrate life is informed by his teaching and researching in philosophical theology, Christian ethics and eco-theology. His array of interests are in themselves a genuine effort toward the integrated life. The essay speaks of many areas for consideration that Christians often see as connected. Merton’s varied interests come to mind. He would be read by some for contemplation, others for issues on race or war and peace, others for an emerging concern for love of nature and environmental issues. These topics are all of one piece for Merton as they are for Klassen. Something that Christians have not held together in their thinking and actions are matters of creation and redemption. This Klassen acknowledges is especially true for many Protestants. Klassen reports, “Evangelicalism, for example, which provided some of my early faith formation, tends to suggest that faith in Christ’s righteousness is an inner transaction that seals us for heaven, but bears no relationship to concrete moral transformation” (181). The implication is that the earth is something to be tolerated at best and ignored at worst. The biblical proclamation that God created the earth and declared it good is all but forgotten. This causes many Evangelicals not to feel responsible for the earth – for the environment. Klassen is relentless in his desire to bring Christianity back to wholeness, to an integrated life, a life that doesn’t worry simply about saving one’s own soul but one that embraces others in love and the world with care. Klassen’s article demonstrates that much more needs to be done in examining both the positive and negative tendencies in Protestantism in relation to Merton’s Catholic (universal) way of thinking and being in the world. In Klassen’s closing remarks, effectively concluding this entire collection, he declares, “For Merton, God’s Word is Jesus, but it is also the animated wisdom and sanctity of all creation” (195). As Merton might say, this brief but profound statement is what is good and true for both Catholics and Protestants when they are at their best!