

Guarding God's Image with Merton as Guide

Review of

Guard the Human Image for It Is the Image of God: Essays on Thomas Merton

Edited by Gary Hall and Detlev Cuntz

Münsterschwarzach: Vier Türme, 2019

135 pp. / \$19.60 paper

Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

Attending academic conferences, although stimulating, is often disappointing because excellent paper presentations tend to be scheduled opposite each other in distant rooms. This new collection of conference papers, edited by Mertonians Gary Hall and Detlev Cuntz, avoids this problem because each speaker had leisure to present individually at a January 2019 weekend symposium at the Abbey of Münsterschwarzach in Germany marking the fiftieth anniversary of Thomas Merton's death. As the editors note in their Foreword, these "presentations – some in German, some in English, one a playful blend of both" – were delivered "at an occasion marked by companionship and mutuality, conversation and laughter, prayer and feasting" (8). Most of the speakers focused on various aspects of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* or *Raids on the Unspeakable*, with several participants examining the relationship between Merton and Karl Barth. Their thoughts are now offered to Merton readers under one cover "in gratitude for our hosts and all who travelled to make the event, and in hope that they contribute to continuing conversation" (8). The participants represented an international flavor of German, Polish, Austrian, American and British scholarship, as well as a spectrum of writing and presentational styles.

The Welcome by Abbot Michael Reepen, OSB (10-11) reiterates principles of Benedictine hospitality from chapter 53 of the *Rule* of St. Benedict with the comment that Thomas Merton, the monk who "breathed the presence of God," is a model for us in this world that urgently needs the purifying power of contemplation and the witness of action. His opening remarks were followed by written greetings from Paul M. Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY and Resident Secretary of the International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) (13). What follows here is a brief overview of each of the nine presentations which will, I hope, whet the reader's appetite for a more thorough reading.

The first formal paper, "Attention to Language" (14-20) by Anselm Grün, OSB, priest of the abbey and author of more than four hundred books, considers the meaning in German of three synonyms – in English, "saying, talking, speaking." The three German words highlight the subtle distinction among "illustrating," "considering" and "speaking from the heart" (15). In Grün's

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view, Merton was adept at conversation, that is, speaking from the heart and understanding both the healing power of language and how language creates a “home.” Grün expresses it quite frankly: Merton “did not write about God, but rather his language allowed God to be experienced” (19). He concludes his paper with a challenge to each of us: to “learn again to build a house with our language, in which a seeking, fearful, worrying humanity finds refuge and feels at home” (20).

Founding member and former ITMS president Bonnie Thurston’s presentation on “Thomas Merton on the Gifts of a Guilty Bystander” (21-32) describes how Merton understood systemic evil and recognized that we are all guilty bystanders. Yet there is a positive role for the bystander who is alert to the power and grace of being on the margin. As Thurston demonstrates, Merton the bystander offers us two important gifts: *marginality*, that is, our perspective on society from a point on its edge, and *hospitality* – becoming a hospice or place of healing for others.

The editors have then grouped a trio of papers focusing on different aspects of Merton and his connection to Barth. “Overcoming Dualism – Unifying Experiences in Thomas Merton’s Dream Life” (33-51) was presented by Lutheran pastor Andreas Ebert, a spiritual guide and co-author with Richard Rohr of a 2001 book on the Enneagram. In his paper, Ebert examines Merton’s experience at Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville and three subsequent dreams about overcoming the opposition between male and female, Christian and Eastern spirituality, and “the feast of the divine child in the human soul” (49). The second paper in this sequence, “Awakening from Barth’s Dream” (52-64) by volume editor Gary Hall, Methodist minister and theology tutor in Birmingham, UK, focuses on “how God comes to us” (60). He explores Barth’s “magisterial legacy” (59) and more “cerebral” experience of God (58), in contrast to Merton’s “multi-layered tapestry of his response to God” that draws us into “the drama and the struggle of a personal engagement” with the Divine (59). The third paper, “Why Barth Needs Merton” (65-82) by Ashley Cocksworth, Senior Lecturer at the University of Roehampton, UK, is a lengthy personal reflection on the dislocating experience of steeping himself initially in Barth and then in Merton. With laser precision, Cocksworth defines Barth as a systematic theologian *par excellence*, and Merton as “more erratic, chaotic even, certainly eclectic, messier, an essayist rather than systematician, a monk rather than academic, elusive and impossible to pin down” (67). With Barth, says Cocksworth, the reader climbs a mountain, but with Merton one tunnels underground through an “extraordinary labyrinth of ideas and imagination” (68). Cocksworth envisions Barth and Merton, having died the same day, in heaven’s waiting room having a good laugh at themselves, talking politics and discussing their “understanding of the political dimensions of prayer” (69). Different though they were, both men shared an “affirmation of the integrity of prayer and theological discourse . . . the integrity of prayer and action”; he notes “the explicit connection that each draw[s] between prayer and liberative action, prayer and protest, prayer and resistance” (76).

The next selection offers a change of pace: a guided meditation led by co-editor Detlev Cuntz, retired businessman and former ITMS International Advisor. His reflections, and the accompanying Power Point slides, are based on a similar presentation by Paul Pearson at the 2013 ITMS General Meeting. Using the “Ox Mountain Parable” material from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Cuntz probes the meaning of the meditation’s title: “Wisdom Cries the

Dawn Deacon: The Healing Power of the Night Spirit and the Dawn Air” (83-101). Both text and imagery – even in printed form – provide a provocative invitation for one’s own personal prayer.

“Thomas Merton and Romano Guardini” (102-108), presented by Kosmas Lars Thielmann, professor and member of the Cistercian Abbey in Wienerwald, Austria, offers a startling picture of these two men, thirty years apart in age, who read each other’s works. While each figure has different views on Rilke, they had some shared reading interests, and are, according to Thielmann, kindred spirits who “opposed the restorative tendencies in society after the war, the increase of mechanization and the depersonalization of humanity” (107).

Wunibald Müller’s “Sermon Offered on January 13, 2019 at the Abbey Church of Münsterschwarzach” (109-15) blends English and German in a playful echo of Merton’s macaronic language games in his letters to Robert Lax. At the same time that it delights, this homily also challenges the reader – in the voice of Merton visiting from heaven – to “discover the shining sun in the brother who is getting on your nerves, or in the partner who is annoying you . . . in the people whose opinion you dislike . . . even in such persons as our present president” (113).

The concluding paper in this collection is by Malgorzata Poks, assistant professor at the University of Silesia, Poland, who tackles the difficult poetry of *The Geography of Lograire*. In “‘Lamb Admits Ties to Cain’ – The Human, the Less-Than-Human, and the Kin(g)dom in Thomas Merton’s *The Geography of Lograire*” (116-31), Poks suggests that Merton was “a decolonial (and de/constructive) thinker *avant la lettre*” and that in *Lograire* he subtly offers “seeds of an inclusive Kin(g)dom of peace and justice that would accommodate all of God’s creation” (117).

While some readers might be put off by the range of approaches, from scholarly to more experiential, nevertheless, the value of this collection will be recognized both now and in future years as we become more adept at international conversation. Kudos to the Abbey of Münsterschwarzach for hosting this symposium and to Gary Hall and Detlev Cuntz for negotiating the translating, editing and production details required to bring this weekend of Merton-immersion into print in English (along with a parallel German edition). Currently, this collection of stimulating presentation is available for free on-line at www.vier-tuerme.de/media/pdf/38/b0/a6/Detlev and in paperback through Amazon.com.