

A Singular Look at Religious Pluralism

Review of

*Opening New Horizons: Seeds of a Theology of Religious Pluralism
in Thomas Merton's Dialogue with D. T. Suzuki*

By Joseph Quinn Raab

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Reviewed by **Michael W. Higgins**

Joseph Raab – author, scholar and co-editor of *The Merton Annual* – is not unknown in Merton circles, and with *Opening New Horizons* we have his close examination of a key feature of the Merton legacy that calls out for extended academic commentary: religious pluralism and the challenges it poses to our religious culture.

Raab establishes his approach, his hermeneutical key if you like, early in the book when he invokes the thinking of Bernard Lonergan, the Canadian Jesuit philosophical theologian, to help him craft his sustained and creative reading of the dialogue conducted over many years between Merton and the Zen Buddhist authority D. T. Suzuki: “Lonergan’s discovery of a generalized empirical method (GEM) operative in human consciousness offers a way of grounding and critically assessing the terms of the dialogue, points of convergence and divergence that emerge from it, and of heuristically elucidating the theology of religious pluralism that Merton’s efforts offer” (9). Raab makes clear his intellectual indebtedness to Lonergan when he observes of the Jesuit thinker’s work, it is “indispensable in terms of offering an explanation of the interdependent relationship between the infrastructure of religious experience and the superstructure of religious traditions” (12).

And so, armed with his Lonergan, well schooled in his understanding of the complex, layered and fecund dialogue and friendship that evolved between Merton and Suzuki, and keen on applying what he unearths in his examination of the current interreligious landscape, Raab makes some arresting points. It has long been argued that Merton’s mind was inclined to the poetic, elliptical, visionary and intuitive, and that correspondingly, he had little taste for the discursive and systematic modes of writing and probing more customarily associated with the academician. But as *Opening New Horizons* demonstrates, he was quite comfortable thinking philosophically when required, could make a compelling argument based on a deep reading of the sources, and although more at home with the symbol than the concept, knew how to make his

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case with sturdy conviction.

Raab notes that Merton – the early Merton of the 1930s, specifically – was an admirer of Étienne Gilson, the historian of philosophy, and that is right. I think, however, it was the aesthetician and metaphysician Jacques Maritain who had the greater and more enduring influence, potently demonstrated in Merton’s review article on the Death-of-God theologian Thomas Altizer:

Afflicted as I am with an incurable case of metaphysics, I cannot see where the idea of Godhead as process is more dynamic than that of Godhead as pure act. To one who has been exposed to scholastic ontology and has not recovered, it remains evident that the activity of becoming is considerably less alive than the act of Being. Far from regarding “pure Being” as static quiescence, traditional metaphysics is in accord with Blake in regarding it as the source and ground of all life:

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.

The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.

The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God.

The nakedness of woman is the work of God.

(*Literary Essays* 9)

Merton’s skillful and original comingling of Blake and Thomism equipped him well for his subsequent engagement with the more opaque and recondite ideas endemic in mystical theology, irrespective of their historical genesis.

When he comes to Suzuki he is not a novice in abstract thinking and he can hold his own. Raab provides ample illustration of Merton and Suzuki struggling, with a respectful candor and ennobling humility, to grasp what the other is thinking, finding commonalities where they exist, responding with awe when alighting on a “new opening,” exploring horizons where more tepid or arrogant souls would fear to tread. Personhood, fullness of being, wisdom, emptiness and more besides all get an invigorating airing as Raab shows with careful attention the points of convergence and divergence in their theological traditions.

Raab recognizes that Merton and Suzuki are kindred spirits and quotes Merton to show that the easy familiarity that they built up between them never obscured their differences in belief but sought, and indeed flourished in, an environment of trust and integrity. Raab quotes Merton to underscore this essential insight: “I feel that in talking to him I am talking to a ‘fellow citizen,’ to one who, though his beliefs in many ways differ from mine, shares a common spiritual climate. This unity of outlook and purpose is extremely significant” (70; *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* 138).

One of the fruits of Raab’s investigations is the clear articulation of Merton’s sapiential approach to interreligious dialogue. In addition, Raab makes clear that Merton’s ecumenical and interreligious instincts were disciplined by years of serious study; he was no amateur in the field, nor a dilettante or faddist. But, as Raab wisely concludes, Merton, ever the “humble iconoclast,” remained “open to the fact that his own *understanding* sometimes needed tacit correction, added depth and breadth, and would continue to open up through a mutually beneficial dialogical process” (147). *Opening New Horizons* invites its readers to do likewise.