

Divine Wisdom Reaching Forth

Review of
The Merton Annual, Volume 36
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Reviewed by **Thomas T. Spencer**

2023 marked the thirty-fifth anniversary of *The Merton Annual*. Sadly, it also brought the passing of Victor Kramer, longtime editor of the *Annual* and a founding member of the International Thomas Merton Society. The current issue of the *Annual*, which opens with a dedication to Kramer (6) and the Foreword: “*The Merton Annual – A Brief History*” (7-8), is a fitting testament to the high standards of excellence Victor Kramer helped establish for the journal. Scholarly, eclectic and thought-provoking, the articles in this volume provide new insights into Merton, the varied ways his writings continue to influence and inspire others, and the many people who impacted his life in ways large or small.

Essays in this issue are taken from the Eighteenth Annual Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society, held at St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana in June 2023. As David Golemboski’s Introduction (9-15) notes, the central theme of the conference – “encounter with divine wisdom” – was inspired by a phrase from Merton’s *Hagia Sophia*: “Sophia comes forth reaching.” The feminine face of the divine as manifest in Sophia is well represented in the selections, as several of the articles deal with Merton, his relationships with women as well as his influence on women.

Those with a special interest in Merton’s activism in the 1960s will be especially pleased that the first section of the *Annual* is devoted to the publication of the remaining letters of Jim Forest to Merton, from 1966 to 1968 (16-64). Forest was co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF) and an active member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Merton and Forest developed a close relationship that centered around their mutual concern for peace. The first segment of their correspondence was published in Volume 35 of the *Annual*. The Forest letters attest to the depth of his friendship with Merton. They begin with the familiar “Dear Tom,” and many conclude with the salutation “love” or “much love.” They are candid and reflective of someone who regarded Merton as a friend, mentor and fellow traveler on the difficult road to peace. While numerous letters discuss routine or mundane matters regarding Merton articles, or the day-to-day matters of the CPF, others reveal the challenges and frustrations Forest endured as an activist for peace. In one such letter he asked Merton’s advice on how to piece together something on the subject of relief

Thomas T. Spencer is a retired teacher in the South Bend Community School Corporation, and Adjunct Professor of History at Indiana University, South Bend and Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, IN. He has been a frequent contributor to *The Merton Seasonal* on various aspects of Thomas Merton’s life and work, most recently the articles “‘They Were Mine and I Theirs’: The Shared Vision of Humanity of Thomas Merton and Richard Wright” (Spring 2022) and “‘Love for Africa . . . in Some Measure My Own’: Thomas Merton’s African Awakening” (Winter 2023).

and the war that would “prod some serious re-thinking of Christian responsibility in time of war” (35). He also discussed with Merton a draft of a letter to *Commonweal* Magazine explaining why he wanted “the bishops to speak out on important issues,” adding, “but what I have to say about their past statements, especially their declaration of support for the war, is hardly going to be seen as a warm pat on the back” (36). The letter was never published. Scholars are likely to find potential new inspirations for further study as the letters discuss at times the internal dynamics of the Catholic Peace Fellowship and the many issues surrounding their efforts during the Vietnam War. Patrick O’Connell’s meticulous editing adds context to the letters, the people mentioned and the issues discussed.

Merton’s relationship with women, his impact on women and the way his writings connect with the feminine are the focus of four articles. Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer’s “The Feminine in Merton’s Life: Some Notes on His Experience with Women” (65-86) highlights the feminine presence in Merton’s life, beginning with his mother and early days as a student through his relationship with the young nurse referred to as M. She concludes that Merton’s relationship with “different representations of the feminine and with the many women present in his life reveals to us a man open to the otherness and difference of the feminine face of creation” (84). Jung Eun Sophia Park, SNJM’s article “Dancing with Thomas Merton in the Borderland” (87-101) addresses Merton’s cross-cultural influence that she believes transcends borders. Drawing upon her personal journey reading Merton and her context as a woman religious from the East living in the West, she concludes: “In the spirit of the borderland, he did not insist on clinging to a fixed identity. Rather, he accepted fully and was open to the new reality, God, the mystery” (101). Merton’s influence on Elena Malits, CSC is the focus of Patricia Sayre’s contribution, “Alone and Together: The Solitary Ties that Bind Thomas Merton and Elena Malits, CSC” (102-20). Malits, author of the 1980 study *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton’s Transforming Journey* and a member of the first Board of Directors of the International Thomas Merton Society, was an admirer of Merton. He influenced her “person and work,” but as Sayre notes, she was “clearly alive to Merton’s flaws as both a man and a writer” (105). Malits and Merton both loved solitude but at the same time both shared what seemed to be a paradox, the “compulsion to communicate” (107). Although they never met personally, she describes their relationship as a friendship and uses the theme of alone and together to expand on the diverse ways it can be possible to be alone and together. Callie Tabor’s “The Sanctity of the Self: Women and Sainthood in Conversation with Thomas Merton and Sr. Thea Bowman” (121-42) examines Merton’s definition of sanctity and the true self in relation to women and the role gender specific notions of holiness have restricted the pathway to sainthood for women. She uses the story of Sr. Thea Bowman, an African-American member of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and a candidate for sainthood, as an example of how the tendency to “simplify complex living holiness into neat hagiographies haunts all efforts for canonization” (138). She concludes that Bowman lived “out Merton’s claim that sanctity can be found in the creative cooperation with God to discover one’s true identity” (142). Furthermore, she adds that Bowman’s “life and thoughts reveal that this creative work can be frustrated by societal and ecclesial estimations of worthiness and holiness” (142).

Merton’s relationship with nature is the subject of Aaron Godlaski’s “Neither This nor That: Merton’s Communion with Nature” (143-56). Examining Merton’s readings and writings chronologically from 1940 to 1968, particularly his journals, Godlaski concludes that Merton’s

embrace of nature and the natural world was central to his mystical development. By the last year of his life Godlaski notes Merton's "kenotic experiences within nature" as transmitted in his notebook *Woods, Shore, Desert* blended "Blake's eternal consciousness, the realized Oneness of the *Ashvatvakra Gita* and Merton's own anti-manifest destiny" (156). Merton had become "expanded by Nature." "Like a tree" it became "a part of something larger than himself, the forest" (155). John Gillespie's article "A World That Wants to Flourish in Love': Thomas Merton, Rainer Maria Rilke and the Hidden Wholeness of Creation" (157-73) compares Merton's writings with the those of the Austrian poet Rilke, particularly Merton's *Hagia Sophia* and Rilke's *Book of Hours*. Gillespie stresses the similarities of language and themes in the writings of the two and demonstrates throughout the article that the two "shared a common vision – a way of seeing the world that extends beyond seeing, or beyond 'inspecting'" (172).

In the 1960s little was happening in the world that Merton was not aware of, and two articles affirm this fact. David Odorisio's "'Not Drugs but Night': Thomas Merton on LSD and the Psychology of Religious Experience" (174-211) and Jim Robinson's "Both 'Hippie Monk' and Distanced Critic: Thomas Merton and the 1960s Counterculture" (212-22) demonstrate Merton's interest in understanding what was occurring during this tumultuous decade. Odorisio draws upon journal entries, letters and Merton's published works to show that in dismissing and critiquing psychedelics as a legitimate path to mystical experience, Merton defined his own emerging "psychology of religious experience" and what he believed constituted "'authentic' mystical experience" (175). Robinson analyzes Merton's reflection on the "hippie" movement of the sixties and concludes that Merton's views were complex and contradictory, at times dismissive but sometimes sympathetic. He viewed Hippies as "fellow margin dwellers with commitments that resonate with those of monastics" even though he often called "into question tactics and practices" he associated with them (222).

The final article from the conference is Huili S. (Kathy) Stout's "*Dao* and Sophia: A Dance of Two Names" (223-44). Stout examines the question of whether the symbol Sophia can help bridge the dialogue between Christians and followers of *Dao*. While she concludes that Sophia as "a metaphysical and theological symbol will not go far in the purely intellectual realm of dialogue between Christians and the followers of *Dao*," she does feel there is "greater potential for dialogue . . . in Sophia's experiential inspiration rather than her speculative symbolism" (244).

Merton scholars and readers will find the review section of *The Merton Annual* particularly useful. Bernadette McNary-Zak's "Pausing to Listen: A Bibliographic Review of 2022" (245-56) highlights major articles and books on Merton published in 2022. It attests to the continued broad range of Merton scholarship. Readers will also benefit from ten reviews of books about or relating to Merton (257-83). Of special note is Rowan Williams' review of the last volume of Merton's series of conferences as novice master, *Liturgical Feasts and Seasons: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 3*. Other reviews include Bill Morgan's *Thomas Merton, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the Protection of All Beings: The Correspondence*, as well as *Awake and Alive: Thomas Merton According to His Novices*, edited by Jon M. Sweeney, and *The Merton Prayer: An Exercise in Authenticity* by Stephen A. Denny, to name just a few.

This thirty-sixth volume of *The Merton Annual* will not disappoint Merton readers. Like the previous thirty-five volumes, it presents a broad range of insightful scholarship that continues

to expand our understanding of the man and the reasons why his prolific and profound writings continue to have such a widespread impact. It will serve as a useful reference tool for further Merton scholarship and a welcome addition to anyone's Merton library. Victor Kramer would surely be pleased.