

Deep Roots, Broad Branches, Life-giving Wind

Review of

Thomas Merton's Holistic Spirituality

By Patrick F. O'Connell

Foreword by Bonnie B. Thurston

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Reviewed by **Daniel DeForest London**

In illustrating Thomas Merton's spirituality, I often employ the metaphor of a towering tree, its deeply embedded roots providing sufficient security and stability for the branches to grow extensively and broadly. Because he was so firmly rooted in his Christian identity, Merton enjoyed the freedom to branch out across religious and cultural traditions with curiosity, candor and compassion. More than any other book about Merton, Patrick O'Connell's analysis of the monk's holistic spirituality not only confirms the sense of this illustration but elaborates upon it with remarkable clarity, accessibility and an unsurpassed mastery of Merton's still-expanding corpus. In *Thomas Merton's Holistic Spirituality*, the author fittingly describes Merton as "compulsively readable" and yet also "exasperatingly inconsistent" (3). In its nine chapters, O'Connell offers a compulsively readable book that underscores the key themes permeating Merton's writings with a refreshing consistency and a special emphasis on the theme of integration.

Chapter 1, "Tradition and Innovation" (1-22), serves as a helpful introduction, showing how Merton's appreciation, appropriation and application of the Christian contemplative tradition accounts for his seemingly paradoxical personality: mystic yet grounded, American yet cosmopolitan, Christian yet comfortable with Buddhists and atheists. In his retrieval and re-presentation of the tradition in which he lives (and which lives inside him), Merton learns to see the world and the self respectively through the lens of sacramentality and the paschal mystery, themes that O'Connell will develop and unpack throughout the book. I appreciate that O'Connell does not feel the need here to provide a summary of Merton's life, a detour that could have easily interrupted the flow of his organized structure and bogged down his engaging presentation.

In chapter 2, "Traditional Roots and Innovative Shoots" (23-40), O'Connell unpacks the meaning and implications of the world's sacramentality as perceived and articulated by Merton. Thanks to the Anglican-turned-Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, Merton discovered the term "inscape," which the poet invented to describe the "inner form of coherence and beauty in particular things" (26). By probing the Franciscan roots of Hopkins' inscape, particularly in the writings of

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Duns Scotus on *hacceitas*, Merton felt inspired to celebrate the natural world as an epiphany of the divine, the Incarnation as the culmination of God's self-disclosure (and not as a consequence of the fall), and care for creation as our participation in the creative, sophianic work of Christ. While section-headings in this chapter (such as "Inscape," "Natural Contemplation," "*Sophia*") would have facilitated the flow of the argument, this chapter provides a deft distillation of Merton's "ecological conscience."

The question about whether Merton's spirituality is "Christocentric" or "theocentric" is addressed in chapter 3, "The Paschal Heart of Merton's Spirituality" (41-63), wherein O'Connell considers both to be incomplete modifiers in contrast to the term *paschal*, which includes and transcends them both (see 42-43). Merton sees the paschal mystery as the very heart of Christian faith and mysticism; and O'Connell sees this same mystery at the very heart of the monk's holistic spirituality. This mystery, which is our sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, informs Merton's understanding of the true self, authentic community and contemplative union. The paschal mystery serves as the lynchpin that holds together Merton's understanding of doctrine, experience, liturgy, sacraments, contemplation, monasticism – as well as interreligious dialogue, since Merton sees paschal dimensions in Zen Buddhism and other forms of authentic self-realization. In a footnote, O'Connell points out that his thematic approach to this topic, as opposed to a chronological approach, may limit the reader's appreciation of the monk's dynamic and maturing understanding over time. However, the thematic approach ultimately proves effective in clearly highlighting the multi-faceted, all-encompassing and indeed holistic influence of the paschal mystery on Merton's spirituality.

Proclamations and implications of the paschal mystery are explored in chapter 4, "Wisdom and Prophecy" (65-88), in which O'Connell examines these two major poles of Merton's spirituality: the affirmation of God's life-giving wisdom that is immanent in all creation, including the true self; and the prophetic denunciation of the idols of military power, wealth and greed, which seduce our attention away from the "paradise that is all around us" (90). Chapter 5, "Awakening in Eden" (89-109) expands upon the theme of paradise in Merton's poetry and prose, concluding that "paradise consciousness is ecological consciousness and the work of paradise is the protection of creation" (97). Especially masterful in his analysis of Merton's poetry, O'Connell uses the image of paradise to integrate Merton the Contemplative with Merton the Poet, who insists that "All really valid poetry . . . is a kind of recovery of paradise" (106).

In chapter 6, "Merton's Vision of the Kingdom" (111-30), O'Connell addresses the central message of Christ's preaching, which is far too often overlooked by his followers: *the Kingdom of God*, a subject about which Merton wrote repeatedly during the last decade of his life. Although it is an uncharacteristically long sentence, the following sums up Merton's theologically robust vision of the kingdom while offering a taste of O'Connell's classic lucidity:

The kingdom is a multidimensional yet unifying symbol that situates the present moment and the entire course of human history in relation to the once-for-all salvific action of Christ and the final eschatological completion of that action; it constitutes the intrinsic dynamism of the church yet cannot be controlled by, contained in, or restricted to the church; it summons Christians to contemplation

and to action as complementary and mutually supportive ways of participating in and revealing its presence; it is both ineffably mysterious in its divine depths and starkly practical in its concrete demands. (130)

The already-and-not-yet nature of the kingdom of God resonates with some of the paradoxical and seemingly contradictory elements of Merton's personality, not the least of which is his self-identification as both a "lay" monk-hermit and a priest, a kind of "coincidence of opposites" that is explored in chapter 7, "What I Wear Is Pants" (131-56). Before departing for Asia, Merton said that he did not want to be a priest but only became one because "it was part of the system" (138). However, shortly after his priestly ordination, he had said it was "*the one great secret for which I had been born*" (139; *Sign of Jonas* 181). O'Connell is certainly no stranger to Merton's previous affirmations of his priesthood. According to the opening essay of *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, edited by O'Connell himself, a recently ordained Merton had said, "There is no greater gift given by Christ to the members His Church than the grace of the priesthood" (*Selected Essays* 11). O'Connell explains that although Merton's priesthood remained an integral part of his spirituality, he sought to ground himself in a deeper identity that was independent of any public role. By identifying as a "lay" monk, Merton was able to most effectively rest in his fundamental identity as a beloved child of God, content with being a "nobody" who prays by simply breathing in the wind that comes through the trees.

In chapter 8, "From Communication to Communion" (157-82), O'Connell uses Merton's 1968 presentation on East-West Dialogue in Calcutta as an entry point for examining Merton's reflections on the potency of *parrhesia* (speaking freely to God), the limitations of language and the communicative power of silence. Through the cataphatic use of symbols and/or the apophatic way of anti-poetry (as in *Cables to the Ace*), poets can become fruitful "ministers of silence," guiding readers into more authentic forms of communication and ultimately into communion in which "we are already one" (182).

In the concluding chapter, "Final Integration" (183-205), O'Connell returns to Merton's 1968 Calcutta presentation as an expression of "transcultural consciousness," which ultimately "transcends the very category of culture itself" (195). Resembling Francis X. Clooney's method of Comparative Theology, O'Connell's process for developing a transcultural consciousness involves: (1) grounding oneself in one's own tradition; (2) recognizing its shortcomings; (3) learning about other traditions on their own terms, and then (4) seeing one's own tradition anew through the eyes of the other. O'Connell then concludes with the following resources for final integration in our fragmented world: solitude, by which we discover and affirm the multitudes within ourselves (Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, etc.); solidarity, characterized by respect, dialogue and identification with the other; and commitment to social transformation, that resists divisiveness, reconciles with forgiveness and restores original unity. Finally, he highlights the key quality that unites all the components of interreligious understanding and integrates all the aspects of Merton's holistic spirituality: compassion.

While the chapters can be read as stand-alone essays, O'Connell helps the reader see each chapter as a branch extending out of the two main limbs that always seem to inform and integrate Merton's spirituality: the world's sacramentality and the paschal mystery. The chapters that include

section headings (1, 3, 8, 9) are especially helpful as the branches frequently extend into offshoots. As someone who has been listening attentively to the Spirit blow through the branches of Merton's spirituality for decades, O'Connell demonstrates an exceptional and authoritative command over the body of Mertonian literature and scholarship. I would have appreciated a list of title abbreviations at the beginning or end of the book since, even though familiar with the Merton corpus, I do not always remember which books *CWA* or *DQ* or "*HR*" or *AHW* represent, and often found myself hunting through the footnotes of each chapter to find the first reference to the title. Nevertheless, any time spent reading an O'Connell footnote is profitable, especially for those eager to explore more intricate offshoots of Merton's life and spirituality. Although the writing is accessible, I would hesitate to suggest this book as a first introduction to Merton since it seems to assume a certain level of acquaintance with Merton's own writings. Those who are familiar with Merton's "exasperatingly inconsistent" writing will likely marvel at the mastery of O'Connell who manages to systematize the monk's spirituality with a refreshing consistency while still maintaining his magnetic and poetic appeal. Indeed, those familiar with Merton's writings will likely agree with Jonathan Montaldo's conclusion (found on the back cover) that this is indeed "one of the best books about Merton ever written."

Merton once said, "No writing on the solitary, meditative dimensions of life can say anything that has not already been said better by the wind in the pine trees" (*Love and Living* 15). If Merton's spirituality is a towering tree, then this book gives readers the opportunity to appreciate the cohesion of its roots and limbs and to listen to the life-giving wind blowing through its branches, and breathe it in.