

2008 Bibliographic Review

The Mystic's Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message to a Distracted World

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In the concluding chapter of what many consider his most eloquent work, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton raises again the choice of two identities: the external mask or the hidden, inner person. The choice is one of allegiance, affecting not only how others see us, but how we see the world. Merton is concerned with identity because of how much it plays in our awareness of "the General Dance," the unstoppable cosmic play of the Lord amidst His creation – "For the world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness" – a festival in which we, as participants, are "invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance."¹ Too often, however, we are distracted by things that steal our attention away and block our ears from the music of the mystical festival. We begin to see things differently, on our own, for our own sakes, and "[t]he more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own, the more we involve ourselves in sadness, absurdity and despair" (NSC 297). We turn away from the general dance to "the general distraction" of momentary amusements, which Merton described earlier in the work as a state of living "in the midst of others, sharing nothing with them but the common noise" which "isolates a man in the worst way, separates him from reality in a way that is almost painless" (NSC 55). The general distraction, in other words, can be so powerful as to divert our awareness from the very pain of our despair, distracting us from despair itself, distracting us from distractions.

According to the warnings of journalist Maggie Jackson, author of *Distracted* (2008), our culture is slipping more and more into a new dark age of distraction because "the way we live is eroding our capacity for deep, sustained, perceptive attention – the building block of intimacy, wisdom and cultural progress."² Cultural patterns of networked individualism, multi-tasking, perpetual mobility, work fragmentation, inattentive blindness, efficiency

defined by acceleration and split-screen foci, are rendering the values of deep attention, open awareness, reflectiveness, pausing, trusting, wondering, nonfunctional if not irrelevant. "We risk losing our means and ability," she argues, "to go beneath the surface, to think deeply" (Jackson 155). There is no choice of identity for survival in a distracted world: "We're all air traffic controllers now" (Jackson 77). Like Merton, Jackson believes there is still time to realize we have a real choice to make: "We can create a culture of attention, recover the ability to pause, focus, connect, judge, and enter deeply into a relationship or idea, or we can slip into numb days of easy diffusion and detachment" (Jackson 266). But time is not on our side, or so it seems.

The sheer busyness of moving from one distraction to another, the automatism involved in constantly having to upgrade the technological equipment of our lives, the mass conformity to a postmodern lifestyle of fragmentation assuaged somewhat by the seductions of hyper-connectivity leaves us either open or closed to the contemplative message of Thomas Merton. Merton understood the dilemma of trying to deliver such a message in a culture of noise: "We must face the fact that the mere thought of contemplation is one which deeply troubles the modern person who takes it seriously. It is so contrary to the modern way of life, so apparently alien, so seemingly impossible, that the modern man who even considers it finds, at first, that his whole being rebels against it."³ Hence we find no rest, no peace "except in a life filled up with movement and activity, with speech, news, communication, recreation, distraction" (*FV* 216).

The hope of Thomas Merton was the hope of a mystic, the hope of one who had contemplated and experienced the communion that unites all with God and the hope that others might come to know such deep relatedness. The recipe has always been simple to some, yet amazingly difficult for others: minimize your activity and maximize your receptivity. The year 2008 marks another year of increasing difficulty for contemplative communication in a world of noise and accelerated action, a world increasingly defined by activity for activity's sake.

This essay will survey a selection of works published in 2008 – the fortieth anniversary of Merton's death – that have sought to understand and promote the ongoing impact of Merton's contemplative message in this ever-distracted world we live in today. I could not possibly review all published works in this category, nor

could I imagine a reader who would want to endure such a survey. Thus the thematic nature of this essay is reduced in scope to works selected for examination that help us see how Merton's ongoing contemplative message aids us in negotiating a world of distraction. I have divided this survey into three sections. The first section will focus on book-length works and conference proceedings, in which "mystical hope" serves as a unifying theme. The second section will focus on one particular author's set of essays in which Merton's contemplative message is lost from view and understanding, a matter that I will treat as an opportunity to delve further into the problem of distraction and some of its consequences. The third section, "contemplation regained," will cover a dozen individual articles from diverse publications, which taken together function as a resounding, positive response to the issues raised in the middle section and the overall cultural problem of distraction.

Jackson's work on distraction will serve mainly as a framing device, for there were, of course, other popular works published in 2008 that were critical of the cultural trends of diversion and division, an overall cultural pattern of adapting to a technology-driven world of constant shifts in focus and cognition (see, for example, the works of Bauerlien, Carr and Siegel⁴). The importance of culture or cultural setting is pertinent to Merton's own arguments about the prospects for the development of contemplative living in a world of hyperactivity. In *The Inner Experience*, Merton notes that "a certain cultural and spiritual atmosphere favors the secret and spontaneous development of the inner self" but "Unfortunately such a cultural setting no longer exists in the West or is no longer common property."⁵ Merton knew well about the dangers of trying to thrust contemplation into a divided world "without warning upon the bewilderment and distraction of Western man" (IE 3). Thus the purpose of this bibliographic review is to discern how well we have learned from Merton, how well the authors, editors and conveyors of Merton's contemplative message fared in the midst of the fortieth clamorous year following his death.

I. Merton: The Mystic of Hope

The first and perhaps most major work to appear in 2008, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, was Merton's own teaching notes for a series of conferences presented to monastic priests seeking an ascetical and mystical theological foundation for a ministry in the pastoral care and spiritual guidance of souls.⁶ This work is

the third volume in a series of Cistercian titles concerning "Initiation into the Monastic Tradition," all brilliantly edited thus far by Patrick O'Connell. This particular work is unique in the series because the primary audience of Merton's teaching is composed of priests in a monastic setting, not novices or students. I could not help but imagine, as I worked through the book, all that could possibly happen if priests outside a monastic setting absorbed such teachings, if Christian mysticism returned home like a prodigal son and was embraced by his brother.

The heritage of spiritual warfare in the Christian faith tradition is long, high and deep, beginning with Adam and Eve in Paradise, amplified during the early life of the Church, extended by saints throughout the centuries. We have learned from other, older faith traditions, that the battle for the soul is an ancient, primordial, perennial matter. To guide someone in the spiritual life, to provide needed wisdom and insight, requires more than a handbook outlining a set of practices, it requires a deeply transformed life. This is how Merton begins to frame the course, an undertaking he explains in which participants must live, not merely believe, their theology to understand it, emphasizing that one "must become *fully impregnated in our mystical tradition*" (ICM 35; Merton's emphasis).

Merton steps carefully around his subject at first, knowing that even though asceticism is a piece of cake in a monastery, mysticism is still – in the early 1960s – a sensitive matter due primarily to the lack of sufficient education on the subject and the stereotypical misunderstandings: a lingering prevalence of false mysticism as well as anti-mysticism since the rise of modernity. In this set of conferences, Merton seeks to restore the organic relationship of mysticism and asceticism as well as spirituality and theology. His intent is not so much to provide an historical survey of the development of Christian mystical thought as it is to set the subject in proper perspective as central to the heart of Christianity and to present mysticism as the foundation for the spiritual direction and guidance of contemplative monks.

Reading this work is, indeed, a course of study, though never dry and academic. What strikes me the most, in this sustained effort to eradicate what for too long had been a watered-down perspective of the mystical heart of Christianity, is how it alerts Merton readers to the fact that *this* is what he has been writing about so earnestly the whole time! Contemplation tended to be the term

of choice, but Merton clearly viewed the two as interchangeable. Case in point: in the same year Merton taught this course, 1961, he published *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *The New Man*. Allow me to dwell only on *The New Man* for the sake of time and space to illustrate Merton's equivalence of contemplation and mysticism. "The mystic," Merton wrote, "that is to say the contemplative, not only sees and touches what is real, but beyond the surface of all that is actual, he attains to communion with the Freedom Who is the source of all actuality."⁷ In the middle of *The New Man*, Merton exclaims: "The spiritual anguish of man has no cure but mysticism" (NM 114; Merton's emphasis). Later on, Merton declares "Christianity and Christian mysticism were, originally, one and the same thing" (NM 171). Mysticism was the basis of his ecumenism, the intersection where Merton was able to connect with so many other spiritual paths, as illustrated by the many interests charted in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, which culminated from a continual track of study as simply evidenced by the copyright dates for the material in *Mystics and Zen Masters*: 1961, 1962, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967.⁸ In his Preface to that work, Merton concluded that "All these studies are united by one central concern: to understand various ways in which men of different traditions have conceived the meaning and method of the 'way' which leads to the highest levels of religious or of metaphysical awareness" (MZM x).

Merton's introduction to Christian mysticism is the exact prescription we need in a culture filled with distractions that seemingly prevent the penetration of reality and communion with God Alone, especially as more and more lay people become interested in the ascetic disciplines of a monastic life that prepare the way for a mystical life. Many people yearn to center themselves in prayer, realize the fruits of solitude, discover silence and stillness as life-giving virtues that practically save one from the false mysticism of a life propelled by distractions and diversions. In the Christian tradition, as early as the fourth century, we have Evagrius teaching monks why it is "a great thing indeed – to pray without distraction; a greater thing still – to sing psalms without distractions."⁹ Merton ably shows how mystical awareness helps direct one's attention to God Alone, paradoxical as that may be. This paradox anchors *The Inner Experience*, in which he tries to explain mystical awareness and how one can be experientially aware of what one cannot experience on earth, to know "Him Who is beyond all knowledge" (IE 115). As O'Connell puts it so well in

his Introduction to Merton's course on mysticism, "Mystical theology is not talk about God, it is encountering a God who cannot be conceptualized" (*ICM* xxviii).

The mystic's hope, therefore, is that others will come to such an experiential awareness, penetrate the superficial surface of a life of distracted activities, and plunge into an encounter that ultimately leads to eternal communion with God. But to understand Christian mysticism is to perceive the many false versions that divert us from what is real. As Merton has explained before, "It is precisely because the Christian view of history has lost too many of its contemplative and mystical elements that it has become something inert and passive, a mere reactionary obscurantism that tolerates injustice and abuse on earth for the sake of a compensation in the afterlife" (*IE* 150). Merton's *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* reveals his attempt to revive that lost history in 1961, and with its publication in 2008, we now have no excuse to lose it again.

Also working against that lost history was a significant conference in 2006 convened in the historic town of Avila, Spain – home of the cherished Christian mystic, St. Teresa of Avila – a meeting from which arose a bilingual collection of papers in 2008 entitled *Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message*, edited by Fernando Beltrán Llavador and Paul M. Pearson.¹⁰ *Seeds of Hope* contains nine essays by Merton scholars (which are reviewed in more depth later in this volume). The dominant hope in these papers is that more people will discover and read Merton's corpus and reap the rewards of real hope. Here, Merton is represented as a messenger to this era, a sower of seeds of hope, as someone wishing to help others celebrate "the Great Feast of Christian Hope" and provide hope in times of crisis. Merton's life is revisited as a life rooted in hope, a living expression of hope. His art, poetry, ecumenism, social conscience are all seen as integral to his call as a monk and to his development as a writer-messenger, prophet and spiritual master.

The opening essay of *Seeds of Hope*, by Fernando Beltrán Llavador, reminds us that Merton's understanding of hope came from the reality of his inner experiences and his experiences of the reality of the world we all live in. Christian hope for Merton is never blind optimism or a pious strategy of neglecting the uncomfortable, but rather, based on Christian love, having "nothing to do with the rejection of problems or an evasion of our deepest existential difficulties."¹¹ Genuine hope springs from awareness of the real.

In the article penned by Erlinda Paguio, a former President of the ITMS, we are led to reflect on Merton's view of hope in *The New Man*, in the same chapter where Merton equates mystics with contemplatives. The chapter focuses upon "the war within," how a terrible wrestling with a sense of being is mixed with a fear of nonexistence, an agonizing situation in which we find ourselves fighting for our lives and the very meaning of our lives. This agony is exacerbated by the countless distractions and diversions leveled at us as promises for salvation, as easements and stress reducers, replacement activities for living in reality that take our minds off our predicament, persuading us that we have the power to be whatever we want. "Yet hope in its full supernatural dimension is beyond our power," Merton assures us. "And when we try to keep ourselves in hope by sheer violent persistence in willing to live, we end if not in despair in what is worse – delusion" (NM 4). Paguio argues that when we are emptied of pipe dreams, when we lose our own strength and confidence, we are then enabled to realize that "Our hope lies in the communion and identification of our own suffering and anguish with the suffering and anguish of Christ."¹² This is the mystical death into life: the death of our false self, a fabricated being generated and sustained by delusions, and the rising to life of our true self in Christ.

Fr. James Conner puts the above understanding in other terms in describing the hope that continues to spring from Merton's life forty years after his death. Conner knew Merton personally and saw him as "a rare individual":

Certainly I can say that knowing him and living with him has been one of the great graces of my own life. The fact that he still speaks so eloquently to so many forty years after his death shows that he had truly lived that type of solitude of which he wrote – a solitude which led him not only into his own heart, but into the heart of every person with whom he is one in Christ¹³

Perhaps it is our ability to enter our own hearts, to experience and learn from inner solitude, that a culture of myriad distractions most threatens. Such a situation is highly destructive for society if our underlying unity as persons is perpetually fragmented and divided, causing us to feel a constant need for connective devices, and therefore making solitude appear to be the enemy of communal life instead of its medicine. Part of Merton's contemplative message

to us today, then, especially relayed by this conference in Spain, is our genuine need for solitude and the continual encouragement to enter our own hearts at least long enough to glimpse our unity with others in Christ.

One of the major problems that concerns Jackson in *Distracted* is the erosion of intimacy in human relationships, particularly how communication is reduced to information-gathering, trust is reduced to surveillance, and presence is reduced to messages. How we meet each other, fall in love, dwell in place, watch our children, work together and bury our loved ones are all experiences that have changed in line with cultural patterns of relating to each other. From her perspective, we have become "ghosts moving in and out of each other's consciousness" (Jackson 58). We live fluid, mobile lives in constant connection with others, never alone or lonely or still, as we buzz and beep our way past each other "often silently, but sometimes with a shriek and a howl" (Jackson 58).

In a distracted world, however, everyone is a stranger, a distraction, hence the timeliness of *The Voice of the Stranger*, three papers and a homily from the Seventh General Meeting and Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland.¹⁴ The authors are Fr. Jim Conner, Bonnie Thurston and David Scott; Fr. Conner also presents the homily. With these papers we come closer to the gravity of our distraction-riddled situation: the possibility of *not* seeing or hearing God. For Merton, "God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in *the voice of the stranger*. . . . God must be allowed the right to speak unpredictably. . . . [I]f we cannot see him unexpectedly in the stranger and the alien, we will not understand him even in the Church."¹⁵ In Merton's letter-essay, the context for the conference papers, the distracted person is likened unto a tourist "who wanders everywhere with his camera, his exposure-meter, his spectacles, his sun glasses, his binoculars, and though gazing around him in all directions never sees what is there. . . . Under no circumstances does it occur to him to become interested in what is actually there. . . . He does not know why he is traveling in the first place" (*ESF* 84; *CP* 386).

Fr. Jim Conner's article, "The Voice of the Stranger – A Manifesto for the 21st Century," focuses on the problems of unawareness and inattention that are rooted in human arrogance that disables people from realizing there is no monopoly on truth: "The great sin of today is for people to think that they have the truth and that

others do not," which is why the tourist never sees the brother in the stranger (*Voice 6*). As in his contribution at the conference in Spain, Conner finds Merton's key to awareness to be in the mystery of true solitude where we find integration with the world. He is critical of "vain pretenses of solidarity" in which "much of what passes for 'community' or 'sharing' is actually mere diversion" (*Voice 7*).

Bonnie Thurston's essay, "Brothers in Prayer and Worship: The Merton/Aziz Correspondence, An Islamic-Christian Dialogue," highlights the rewards of seeing God in the stranger. Thurston relays a particularly enlightening quotation from one of Merton's letters to Aziz that underlines the importance of checking one's arrogance at the door:

Personally, in matters where dogmatic beliefs differ, I think that controversy is of little value because it takes us away from the spiritual realities into the realm of words and ideas. In the realm of realities we may have a great deal in common, whereas in words there are apt to be infinite complexities and subtleties which are beyond resolution. . . . It is important . . . to try to understand the beliefs of other religions. But much more important is the sharing of the experience of divine light. (*Voice 27-28*)

In the spirit of learning, Thurston shows how Merton was eager to learn about the Moslem practice of retreat, especially the *Khalwa*, a forty-day solitary retreat. From that discussion the exchange between Merton and Aziz focused on the spiritual practices of prayer and meditation as their experience of an underlying unity grew.

David Scott's contribution centered on "The Poet as Stranger" and the seeming requirement of poets to see things strangely in order to challenge our blinding presuppositions and habits of inattentiveness. Scott emphasizes, too, that the poet must be a stranger to the prevailing culture as well. This seeming detachment, though, brings the strange into familiar relation. I was reminded of the etymology of the word "respect," which means to look again; to respect someone is to take another, deeper look beyond our initial judgments and certainties in order to really see someone. To respect a stranger, then, is to realize they are not so strange after all. Interestingly, Scott admits that Merton, himself, can "come to be a stranger to us," that Merton's poetry can be difficult for readers, but that this should not prevent further com-

munication. Perhaps Merton's poetry allowed him a means to prevent being easily understood and categorized and hung up to dry; not intentionally opaque, but playfully alert to the truth behind all of us: we communicating beings whose messages can never exhaust their source. Hence the danger of cutting each other off as if we already have the message. As Merton put it in the "Letter to Cuadra": "If I insist on giving you my truth, and never stop to receive your truth in return, then there can be no truth between us" (*ESF* 81; *CP* 383).

Finally, Fr. Conner closes out this collection of papers with a "Eucharistic Homily." Jesus appeared as stranger on the road to Emmaus and the disciples' eyes were prevented from recognizing Him. Our problem today is that we still think

we know one another and those we encounter in daily life. But we never truly get to know the heart of the other. We do not know their pain and anxiety. In fact, we do not allow ourselves to know their heart, because if we did, we would have to know our own heart. And that requires that we face our own pain and anxiety. Yet only then will our eyes be opened. (*Voice* 56)

Conner calls for the eyes to be opened as the bread is broken and we come to know that we are a part of everyone else in the world just as they are a part of us. Such awareness plants the seed of hope in a world of distraction where we are ceaselessly cajoled away from the heart of reality.

Letter-writing became an essential way for Merton to stay in personal contact with countless people whose relationship he valued. A careful reading of Merton's letters to someone over time provides more than enough evidence to prove that Merton took the time to co-respond with people. Far from a world of hasty emails, instant messaging and spur-of-the moment browsing for information, Merton developed relationships with people, often communicating from inner person to inner person. The time in between letter-writing was as important as the spaces between words on the page. Two collections of Merton's letters appeared in 2008 that help us continue to appreciate not only this important art form but Merton's value of time itself. One collection, edited by William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen, *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection*, is the best overview of Merton's correspondence, gleaned from over 10,000 letters in the Merton Center archives at Bellarmine University.¹⁶ The editors chose nine

themes to organize the letters and each grouping is preceded by a helpful introduction to provide a context for understanding and appreciation. One may be struck by the boldness of Merton to initiate correspondence with a famous figure, but there seems to be a kind of innocence at work here too, innocence rather than audacity in approaching people high and low on the social status meter simply because he sensed an underlying communion with others so genuinely. Nevertheless, such an innocence never blinded Merton as to the varying ways he needed to approach making contact with someone for the first time. He was careful, wise, courteous and never demanding, cocky or hostile, even when writing to disagree with someone. As we have witnessed throughout Merton's vast writings, his letters reveal that mystical, ecumenical spirit that streamed throughout his life, moving him to seek correspondence above the level of words and ideas only in order to pave the way for a mutual sharing of the deeper realities of life.

In a more narrow collection of letters, *A Meeting of Angels*, edited by Paul Pearson, we are privileged to share the correspondence on both sides of a warm relationship between Merton and Edward Deming Andrews and, after his death, with his wife Faith Andrews.¹⁷ Andrews and Merton shared a love of the Shakers; thus these letters provide even more insight into Merton's interest in Shaker culture that was roused by the publication in 2003 of Merton's *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers*, also edited by Paul Pearson.¹⁸ After a brief background introduction by Pearson, we read the first letter by Andrews, who initiated the correspondence in 1960. Merton responds within two weeks with enthusiasm and three times the number of words! Andrews wants Merton to write an Introduction for a book on the Shakers, an idea on which Merton muses: "Certainly a Cistercian ought to be in a good position to understand the Shaker spirit, and I do hope that with leisure, study and meditation I will eventually be able to do something on this wonderful subject" (MA 19). Merton is not putting Andrews off, building an escape clause into the letter to allow himself the chance to worm his way out of a responsibility. To the contrary, Merton is letting Andrews know just how much Merton, himself, understands already; he is communicating a sincere willingness to help and a commitment to quality workmanship. In this same letter, he informs Andrews that he is working on a related project with Doña Luisa (Mrs. Ananda) Coomaraswamy. Andrews replies by sharing his own admiration for Ananda Coomaraswamy's

work, particularly his knowledge of Shaker furniture (I'll return to Coomaraswamy in just a moment). As the correspondence continues over time, Merton feels free to admit that "In the contemplative life one imagines that one would spend all the time absorbed in contemplation, but alas this is not the case. There are always innumerable things to be done and obstacles to getting them done, and large and small troubles" (MA 51).

I highlight this last excerpt to recall the thematic problem of distraction, and to reiterate how and why the contemplative message of a monk can be so helpful to those of us who literally bounce to and fro among innumerable things. Merton's exchange with Andrews reminds us of our need for discipline in finding the leisure to study and meditate on what we most need to attend to. Mysticism, for Merton, is never speculative but always deals in the concrete, a thought that brings me back to Coomaraswamy, whose published review of Andrews' book on Shaker furniture is appended at the end of *Meeting of Angels*, in which he raises a question full of hope that the answer be realized sooner than later: "Is not the 'mystic,' after all, the only really 'practical' man?" (MA 117).

Speaking of being practical, Patricia Burton's *More Than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* is the most practical resource available to students and scholars of Merton.¹⁹ To just begin to appreciate the magnitude and complexity of the work Burton has accomplished here, I would ask you to conduct a simple timed exercise. Start your timer and proceed to a grocery and buy fifty canned vegetables. Once home, list all the vegetables in alphabetical order, followed by a list of brand names in alphabetical order. Next, list the content weight of each can in order from lightest to heaviest, followed by a list of prices for each can, beginning with the cheapest to the most costly. Cross-check your list with other groceries in your area. Return to the grocery and find all canned vegetables not included in the first sampling. Revise your lists. Return to the market and buy fresh vegetables, fruits, breads, etc. You will start to have a feel for the complexity of the task before Burton, which she has patiently and masterfully accomplished. All of Merton's writings, revisions, translations into other languages, printed in different editions, appearing under different titles, and so on are included. Opening the book at any page, one is struck by the sheer work involved in finding, ordering and presenting the work on that page for others' ease in research. Clearly, such a work is essential for anyone in the world doing research on Mer-

ton, or who simply wants to dig deeper into the treasure trove of his writings. But Burton provides another reason for owning this work: it helps one better appreciate the life work and impact of Merton. As Burton puts it,

Merton brought the idea of contemplation within the ambit of ordinary non-monastic people, and he did it almost entirely with writing. This bibliography demonstrates not only the vast reach which the mass-market paperbacks implied, but a durability that is astonishing in an era where gurus come and go: splashy promotions one minute and the remainder pile the next. (Burton xiii)

Burton is concerned not only with Merton's impact during his lifetime, but his continual impact through his writings today. It is not an easy task keeping up with all of Merton's writings and all the new venues and contexts in which they appear; thus Burton admits as a bibliographer, "Merton will always be a moving target" (Burton xiv). She adds, this bibliography, therefore, "is not an obituary for a long-mummified literary figure: it is a report from the front" (Burton xiv). Burton's hard, invaluable work should help all of us appreciate how much Merton's contemplative message continues to thrive.

II. The Contemplative Message: Lost in Distraction

In this section I will examine a series of three articles about Merton published by a single author for whom Merton's contemplative message is unfortunately lost from view and understanding. The articles share many problems that deserve fuller analysis and critique, but I would like to take the opportunity that an initial review provides to consider the set as an example of distraction-at-work in the scholarly realm, which will allow me to explore the problem of distraction in more depth. Even though these articles were published a few months before the year presently under review, a critique is nevertheless warranted here, I think, because of the responsibility that Merton scholars shoulder in studying, representing and sharing Merton's contemplative message. There must be care in communicating a contemplative message as well as care in its reception; Merton's life taught that lesson if none other. Unfortunately, it is quite easy to be distracted away from contemplation. The problem of distraction in relation to contemplation, however, is not merely that there is a shift in attention, for we can regain at-

tention; yet, left unchecked, distraction erodes leisure, erodes the time needed for deep study, erodes the practice of meditation, all of which are consequences resulting from a mindset of distraction. Sustained distractedness, furthermore, impedes communication, fragments relationships, reduces knowledge to infotainment, distorts truth, misleads and closes minds.

The three articles I wish to spotlight were authored by Joseph M. Kramp and were published 2007 in three successive issues (January, March and May) of the academic journal *Pastoral Psychology*.²⁰ The three articles appear to be extracted from the author's Master's thesis, "The Lives of Thomas Merton: A Study in Psychoanalysis, History, and Identity" upon graduation from Princeton Theological Seminary and before moving on to become a doctoral candidate in the Religion and Society program at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. The articles explore what Kramp refers to as "Merton's melancholia," a condition that is argued to have resulted after the loss of Merton's mother, which later compelled him to enter the Catholic Church, become a monk, engage in a shameful affair and eventually commit suicide. Kramp argues that understanding Merton from a psychoanalytic perspective is necessary for a full appreciation of his life and work given the fact that he is such an important religious figure. I have no doubt that most Merton scholars and students of Merton would find Kramp's thesis ludicrous, but such gross misinterpretations of Merton's writings require a degree of patient attention to discern the problematic causes of an errant process of reasoning.

Kramp is working from a Freudian perspective as filtered through the theoretical work of Donald Capps, a leader in pastoral psychology and Kramp's mentor at Princeton (Capps retired in 2007 and is now professor emeritus). Kramp's theoretical starting point, borrowed from Capps, is that Merton's inability to mourn his mother's death led to a condition of melancholia, which developed more fully over time, influencing Merton's life in crucial ways. For Capps, melancholia is often the reason why males enter religious life.²¹ Kramp also borrows a set of theoretical terms from Capps that serve as an interpretive lens through which he analyzes Merton's writings and life, terms associated with three alleged stages in the melancholic life of religious men: religion of honor, religion of hope, religion of humor. Kramp asserts that each of these phases or stages helps explain Merton's psychological condition, despite Kramp's lack of a clear explanation of the terms and general thesis.

As best as I could gather, the terms are used in reference to Merton in the following way: (1) *religion of honor* refers to asceticism and a felt need to work for one's salvation; (2) *religion of hope* refers to a period of growth in the religious male, but allegedly in the case of Merton, his only hope was to leave the monastery and Catholicism, which he was unable to do – hence his melancholia grew into despair; (3) *religion of humor* refers to the sign of maturity in which one develops the ability to laugh at one's religion and assert one's individuality, which Merton was unable to do because he took religious life too seriously – hence his unhappiness led to the tragic decision to commit suicide.

This set of articles deserves a more thorough critique than I can provide here. There are many serious problems with this project, some of which must be mentioned before I move to discuss Kramp's perspective in relation to the problem of distraction. In terms of critical objections to the articles as scholarship, let me state at least six general but grave concerns.

First, the author is working from a prejudiced ignorance of both Catholicism and monasticism; no effort is made to identify anything remotely positive or healthy about these two institutions and traditions. Kramp even goes so far as to intimate that Merton was anti-Protestant, supposedly being evidence of his presumed identity conflict, a claim that in and of itself demonstrates unfamiliarity with Thomas Merton. Second, this first problem seems to have caused a very jaundiced perspective of "contemplative prayer" in particular; although Kramp never explains precisely what he thinks is wrong with such prayer, he gives several reasons why he thinks Merton's use of it was highly problematic. Somehow Kramp thinks he has provided a reasonable basis to claim that "Merton used contemplative prayer to justify his own suffering," and thus while having "cloaked this issue in heady language," contemplative prayer becomes "one of the vehicles for Merton's own evasion from the responsibility of mature adult personhood" (Kramp, "Suicide" 624, 625).²² Third, Kramp claims to be "a student of Merton" but his convoluted narrative of Merton's life, continual misinterpretations of Merton's writing and gross neglect of existing Merton scholarship prove otherwise (Kramp, "Melancholia [2]" 444). For example, he does not make use of any authoritative or respected scholarship on Merton, and builds his case on his own assumptions and less than a handful of isolated, minor conjectures by others; he tortures Merton's words to force

countless false confessions until he breaks their meanings and contexts entirely. Fourth, Kramp makes it a habit to equate his own assumptions as logical premises for argument that almost immediately become conclusions. As a glaring example, his rationale for claiming Merton committed suicide is cavalierly presented to be justified by two reasons, both of which Kramp invented himself in the first two articles of the series. Fifth, Kramp appears completely unaware of the spirituality of the interior, of the inner life and the reality of spiritual warfare; the war between soul and flesh (choose your terms here) seems reduced to mental contradictions and a weak sense of identity. Thus Kramp is unable to read Merton very deeply at all and is left to a shallow analysis of words on a page instead of a legitimate psychoanalysis of a dynamic person. Even so, Kramp wildly deems his own analysis, in fact, to be an extension of Merton's work and desire:

I do not pretend to offer the final definitive interpretation of Merton's sexual life and his relationship with his mother, nor do I pretend to assert that Merton's humanity (which is so obvious in this paper) is a reason to disregard salient contributions he has made. Still I believe this paper to be an essential contribution to the literature already written on Merton since it is, from my viewpoint, the fruit of his own labor. Merton struggled repeatedly to make sense of his conflicts, and pointed shyly and yet courageously to psychoanalysis in his journals and latter works on monastic reform for help. This is what Merton himself desired to be done and I have chosen to respond with vigor. (Kramp, "Melancholia [2]" 444)

A sixth problem with Kramp's work is that it is an example of cookie-cutter criticism, a critique that is more concerned with consistency in use of terminology and framework than any consistency in facts regarding the subject itself; that is to say, Kramp appears more concerned to showcase his admiration for his mentor's work than he is about his distortion of his object of study, Merton.

In short, we learn more about Kramp's respect for the work of Donald Capps than we learn anything about Merton because of the unhesitant forcing of Merton's life into an inappropriate framework. In the end, we do not have simply an alternative interpretation of Merton's life, but rather a display of crude negligence in conducting an intellectual inquiry.

But, how is this a problem of distraction? My objective is not

to force Kramp's work into a theoretical framework and repeat the error I just criticized; rather, my intention is to use my critique of Kramp's articles as an opportunity to further illumine the relationship between distraction and attention and its relevance to Merton's contemplative message. I will come back to Kramp in a moment, but first I want to introduce some ideas from Joseph Urgo's study, *In the Age of Distraction* (2000), that I hope will extend our appreciation for the range of the problem of distraction as well as the value of Merton's contemplative message in such an era.²³ This will, in turn, prepare the way, I hope, for greater appreciation of the many good works of Merton scholarship that appeared in 2008 that will be spotlighted in a moment.

Urgo, an English professor, has long been concerned about the disappearing role of imagination in building the interior life of his students, a capacity he argues is increasingly eroded by a culture of distraction. Sounding a bit like Evagrius, Urgo argues that "to gain access to this interior realm, one must exert control over what is ingested intellectually. Simply stated, one must control the distractions" (Urgo 7). For Urgo, distraction is paradoxical in that it involves the absence of attention while simultaneously functioning as a form of attention. "Distraction is," he writes, "simply, attention to something other" (Urgo 8). He explains that "distraction is attention to something other than that which, at the moment, is not attended to"; thus distraction "depends on absence for its existence" (Urgo 8). We develop habits of attention that are learned through cultural and social conditioning; for example, the concept of "attention complicity" has arisen in reference to a perceived process of socialization that trains one to focus attention on some things instead of others, resulting in an attention deficit by approval or a reduced capacity for awareness that conforms to social pressures.

What is worrisome here are the consequences of distraction, the results of inattention and neglected attention. For example, the constancy and ceaselessness of information all around us can condition us to pay attention only to what attracts us or relates to us, insuring that we will not likely attend to other things, even matters that might be of greater importance. Information, in other words, is most likely attended to if it satisfies egocentric concerns. Here, Urgo argues that information too easily becomes infotainment, reduced to something that is "consumed for diversion rather than for consequential purposes" (Urgo 35). One serious result of

this situation is that “the world represented by infotainment appears eternally on the brink of disaster, with little time available for contemplation or the cultivation of real, consequential knowledge” (Urgo 43). We seize an idea or judgment, feel comfortable with it, and then rush to enshrine it as knowledge. He further argues that infotainment (information that entertains the mind instead of nourishing or challenging it) distracts the mind by consuming time and leads to a “kind of passivity that flows from satisfaction, coupled with an arrogance that is produced by a continuous, structured reinforcement that one is in the know” (Urgo 55). Urgo contrasts infotainment with “consequential knowledge” which transforms the knower from one intellectual state to another and expands one’s

sense of now so that time is among the least of one’s anxieties. Such knowledge does not satisfy, it agitates, so that the mind is enlivened with a sense of renewal and purpose . . . as one discovers not information but the depths of what one does not know and the expanse of what can be explored, absent the interference of consumption. (Urgo 56)

Two kinds of attention, then, are described here: one is arrogant, the other is humble. Arrogant attentiveness leads one to a willingness to be distracted from what one does not know in order to focus on what one claims to know. Humble attentiveness seeks to attend to what one does not know, and thus is open to change. The disquieting question of distraction is not “what are you attending to now?” but rather “what are you not attending to and why?”

For Maggie Jackson, a distraction is an interruption that diverts our attention; this is not problematic in and of itself because we can choose to return our attention to its original focus – we can regain focus. Multi-tasking, however, is more problematic in that it is essentially “the juggling of interruptions, the moment when we choose to or are driven to switch from one task to another” (Jackson 84). (Imagine the destruction of silence, simplicity and solitude in a hermitage by trying to juggle one’s attention among various tasks). Ultimately, the concern about distraction and attention involves the larger function of awareness itself. Arrogant attentiveness closes the range of awareness and is less alert to other demands on understanding, whereas a more humble form of attention can withstand distractions because it remains open to the larger and dynamic circumference of awareness.

We can understand Merton's contemplative life and message, in part, as a plea for humble attentiveness, a rallying cry for greater awareness and openness for the sake of attending to the most consequential knowing, the mystical unknowing, of God Alone, for here we find our true selves and our communion with all of creation. "We cannot see things in perspective," Merton wrote, "until we cease to hug them to our own bosom."²⁴ In other words greater awareness should dictate our attention, not distractions that divert and drain our attentiveness while reducing our capacity for awareness. A culture that caters to a short attention span dulls our awareness even while it supplies a million objects for attention. A lifestyle of distractedness, therefore, may involve the twin dangers of eroding our awareness of what transcends us as well as what is deepest within. Seemingly, we are always distracted to something, and away from an awareness of emptiness, of what we cannot fathom. Merton explains in *The Inner Experience* that a genuine sacred attitude never recoils from emptiness; in fact

This is a most important discovery in the interior life. For the external self *fears* and recoils from what is beyond it and above it. It dreads the seeming emptiness and darkness of the interior self. The whole tragedy of "diversion" is precisely that it is a flight from all that is most real and immediate and genuine in ourselves. It is a flight from life and from experience – an attempt to put a veil of objects between the mind and its experience of itself. (IE 53)

Unfortunately, for Kramp's misguided psychoanalysis of Merton, his attention is diverted ironically away from Merton's interior life in order to focus attention on a theoretical explanation of the possible connections between external events in Merton's life. Distraction recoils from the emptiness it is, by nature, disposed to avoid.

Kramp's forced analysis of Merton reveals a choice of attention, and Kramp chose to attend to his mentor's theories rather than to the subject of his proposed analysis. One consequence of this distraction is poor scholarship, but another consequence is the likelihood that his articles may mislead and therefore divert the attention of possible readers from Merton's life and writings. If these three articles were extracted from his master's thesis, then there is a graduate team of professors who were complicit in Kramp's distractedness. Distraction is at work in others, too, in

that such errant scholarship was allowed to pass the peer review process of an established academic journal. We are all, of course, subject to and seduced by distractions. Distraction is a cultural and social problem, but it must be understood chiefly as a spiritual problem. Merton's contemplative message, in all its myriad forms, provides wisdom in dealing with our distracted culture and lives. Unfortunately for readers of Kramp's perspective of Merton, that contemplative message is completely lost.

In closing this section, I cannot help but be struck by the contrast between Kramp's self-proclaimed contribution to pastoral psychology today and what we find in Merton's own contribution concerning spiritual guidance in his *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*. But what is most distressing of all, to me, is Kramp's bypassing of the spiritual, his collapse of Merton's deep spiritual life into an elementary grid of psychological terms and concepts, followed by an apparent satisfaction with the distraction he has now projected for others' diversion. Kramp tries to empathize with Merton. He notices that "Merton himself was very good at self-effacing, but how about a joke to ease the psychic pain he experienced every morning in this recurring battle with melancholia?" (Kramp, "Suicide" 622). Kramp then confesses that "it is painful to study and write about this myself without considering humorous possibilities to ease the severity of the pain I vicariously feel as I study Merton's identity conflicts" (Kramp, "Suicide" 622). In the end, Kramp cannot recognize the brother in the stranger, and seems to fit rather well the description Merton gave of the "tourist" in his "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra." Under a forced psychoanalysis, Merton becomes a stranger to Kramp, a stranger who "becomes part of his own screen of fantasies" (*ESF* 83; *CP* 385), and "For all practical purposes, the stranger no longer exists. He is not even seen. He is replaced by a fantastic image. What is seen and approved, in a vague, superficial way, is the stereotype that has been created by the travel agency" (*ESF* 84; *CP* 386).

III. Merton's Contemplative Message: Regained

I would now like to direct the reader's attention to a dozen individual articles published mostly in 2008 that were clearly more successful in examining Merton's contemplative message in a distracted world.

Interestingly, another article on Merton appeared in the same journal that Kramp's work was presented, *Pastoral Psychology* –

same volume, different issue – but this time the scholarship is more accurate, well-reasoned and helpful. The essay is by Paul M. Kline and concerns “Merton’s ‘True Self’: A Resource for Survivors of Sexual Abuse by Priests.”²⁵ Kline argues that Merton’s writings on the true self can potentially help victims of sexual abuse by priests in providing a means to conceive of themselves as not fated to live with an identity tied their body and what affects it, to conceive of themselves as more than a victim, and to realize that there is an essence to their personhood that is untouchable by man because it is rooted in God. How stark the contrast between Kline’s healthy portrayal of Merton and Kramp’s tragic projection. Kline does not make the mistake of trying to set Merton on a pedestal as a model of the true self; rather he places attention on the fact that Merton’s strong, positive reputation within the Catholic Church, particularly, along with his teaching about the true self, is a solid resource for children grappling with identity conflicts due to abuse by priests. “Alienated from their sacred identity,” Kline explains, “trauma especially in childhood, assaults victims with experiences which may contradict and overpower the developing awareness of the true self” (Kline 737).

Turning now to someone who knows Merton, monasticism and psychology quite well, we must consider Fr. John Eudes Bamberger’s contribution to *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*’s commemoration issue of the fortieth anniversary of Merton’s death with an essay on “Thomas Merton: Monk and Contemplative.”²⁶ Bamberger claims contemplation was the dominant focus and concern throughout Merton’s life, but “[h]owever important contemplative prayer was to Merton, he well understood that such experience was in the service of union with God, not an end in itself” (Bamberger 393). In direct contrast to Kramp’s thesis of despair, Bamberger writes that Merton spoke of being transformed and that “the transformation he has in mind is a life-long process that culminates in the formation of a person so constituted that he is capable of participating happily in the very life of God himself” (Bamberger 401). In his capacity as editor of this issue, Bamberger asserts:

There is every reason to believe that in the coming years there will continue to be many lay persons, as well as nuns and monks seeking a deeper spiritual life and ways of expressing their Christian faith, people who find inspiration in the life and writings of Thomas Merton. This publication, which he helped

to found in 1966, intends to make available the future studies and insights that his life and work continue to stimulate.²⁷

The significance and contemplative message of Merton is certainly safe with Bamberger as he sees Merton's influence continuing to help others find a deeper spiritual life in the midst of a world full of competing distractions.

A third article examines Merton's contemplative message as expressed through his poetry as Patrick O'Connell makes a solid case in "'The Surest Home is Pointless': A Pathless Path through Thomas Merton's Poetic Corpus" for the necessity to understand Merton's poetry as integral to his spiritual and social vision and our appreciation of him as a writer.²⁸ O'Connell's argument is also good advice not only for understanding Merton's contemplative message, but for countering misreadings and misconceptions of Merton's life and work, as well. O'Connell notes that even in Merton's poems of "sacramental awareness, there is often a direct or implicit contrast with the perspective of those who fail to perceive the truth because they try to force reality to conform to their own expectations" (O'Connell 525). In surveying the entirety of Merton's poetry, O'Connell recommends that readers approach the poetry as a whole, in which case it exists as an integral part of the whole of Merton's writings in general, and that they be particularly attentive to the patterns and themes that weave throughout Merton's poetry across the decades, as opposed to being distracted by this or that poem as if they represented the corpus. O'Connell understands that the seeming contradictions in Merton's writing are most often paradoxes, that "getting nowhere," "pathless paths" and "pointless points" are not tantamount to despair but express openness and spiritual maturity. The interior and exterior of our lives are not contradictory but are correlative dimensions of the whole person. Anyone seeking to understand the sapiential and sacramental awareness with which Merton wrote and saw our world would find much to learn in this substantial essay.

Merton's contemplative message of awareness is still infective in 2008 in light of the numbers of people influenced by his writings and continuing to express a desire to see reality as Merton saw it. Gerald Twomey published a two-part series of articles highlighting Merton's influence on Henri Nouwen that provides a significant case in point: "'Tools in the Hand of God': Thomas Merton's Influence on Henri J. M. Nouwen."²⁹ Nouwen (1932-1996), of course,

has himself influenced countless individuals and readers since he was ordained a priest in 1957, shortly after beginning work as a pastoral psychologist. Nouwen played an important role in spreading Merton's contemplative message to his native country of Holland despite only having met Merton once, personally, in 1967. Twomey uses three headings – solitude, compassion and community – to focus his exploration of Merton's influence on three areas of spiritual life that were of most importance to Nouwen. As Twomey explores the parallel thought of Merton and Nouwen, he lends insight into the nature of conflict in each person. "Merton's foibles and weaknesses often manifested themselves, but as he readily confessed, 'We are not meant to resolve all contradictions, but to live with them and to rise above them'" (Twomey [2] 17). It was Merton's healthy and mature spirituality that provided so much encouragement to Nouwen, which he in turn relayed to all his contacts and communities.

Richard Hauser, SJ, begins his essay casting a wider view of Merton's influence in "Thomas Merton's Legacy: A Personal Reflection," arguing that Merton's influence stretched beyond individuals such as Henri Nouwen and Thomas Keating to affect an entire generation, altering many people's approach to spirituality.³⁰ Hauser then begins to recount that influence on his own life as a member of a generation affected by Merton. Hauser selects five thematic areas for focused attention: (1) models of spirituality, (2) personal prayer, (3) the sacred and the secular, (4) nonviolence, and (5) interreligious understanding. Reflecting upon Merton's influence forty years after his death, Hauser does not consider "it an exaggeration to say that Merton was a prophet heralding a new age of spirituality" (Hauser 355). Hauser credits Merton, too, with helping him better understand and appreciate his own Ignatian roots as a Jesuit, particularly in helping him overcome a false self identity that had distracted him from attending to his vocation.

Thus far we have examined five articles that provide an alternative to Joseph Kramp's thesis and inability to appreciate Merton's contemplative message, especially given a world filled with identity struggles, inner conflicts, contradictions and distractions. I am led to wonder how Kramp could possibly resolve a central contradiction in his own writings about Merton; he is able to acknowledge Merton's significant influence on others, but tries to maintain the claim that Merton sacrificed his own true self to project a highly inspiring false impression. It is possible for me to

imagine the possibility, for a micro-moment, that Kramp is right, that Merton lived in futility, shame and despair to the tragic point of committing suicide in order to sacrifice his life for the purpose of showing people how *not* to live (do as I say, not as I do). But how can a negative example influence so many people to live so radically differently and continue to inspire them to thank Merton for affecting them so positively? Let us return to more sensible perspectives.

David King, an Associate Professor of English and Film Studies at Kennesaw State University in Atlanta, Georgia, published a wonderful essay for educators entitled "Fine and Dangerous: Teaching Merton," arguing very effectively for why the contemplative message of Merton should become a more consistent subject matter in higher education.³¹ This is a delight to read, filled with encouraging ideas and arguments if you are a college teacher. King does not propose teaching Merton strictly as a historical or literary figure so much as teaching Merton's contemplative message, his method, his way of awareness, his perspective. King is well aware of arguments from colleagues against trying to teach Merton at the higher levels of education, but King is just as easily able to dispense with them. It is through his teaching experience that King is convinced Merton will be well-received by post-9/11 college students, especially because of Merton's example of openness, willingness to learn and transcend prejudices, his honesty and candor, his appreciation for paradox. The author has taught Merton in a variety of contexts but maintains that "Merton is best taught in a course that is dedicated solely to him and his primary works" (King 81). King teaches Merton under "the twofold assumption that what Merton has to say is beautiful, and that it is said beautifully" (King 81). He recommends using books and films as well as heeding two principles in teaching Merton: allow for silence in the classroom and know that everything cannot be learned in one course. I am aware of an ITMS committee that is overseeing the tracking of this important goal of teaching Merton's contemplative message at the university level. May King's article inspire more work in this area.

How do you teach Merton in a postmodern culture is one question, but another is what Merton would think about postmodernity. What would Merton read and who would he seek correspondence with in these times? Such questions are raised by Melvyn Matthews in "Thomas Merton: Postmodernist *Avant La Lettre*?"³² Matthews

wonders about what Merton would think regarding postmodern thought and theology and feels confident in asserting that Merton would agree with the postmodern dethronement of the self and reject the modernist enshrinement of reason, or at least he would be fascinated with the issues. "Yes, Merton would have been interested in the postmodernists," he writes, and "he would have agreed with them about the need to dethrone the ego and the centrality of reason. But, I thought, they would have had a thing or two to teach him as well. He never went far enough. Because he was so hung up on ontological thinking he could still not dissolve the ego sufficiently" (Matthews 29). I see his point but am not sure if I completely agree with it. For one reason, I do not think Merton scholars have given enough serious and sustained attention to the mystical vision of Merton. Matthews provides more food for thought on the question: "Devotionally he was there, but philosophically speaking he was not" (Matthews 29). But what about mystically-thinking? Matthews drops the names of religious intellectuals he suggests we should all be reading along with Merton if he were here, for example, Jean-Luc Marion, Emmanuel Levinas, René Girard. If anyone is looking for a good doctoral dissertation idea, here is something to chew on. As needed as such speculative studies are, I am leery of endorsing contemporary thought as the most proper position from which to judge and measure past thought. I recall the motto of Bernard McGinn: "We can turn to the past not only to mine it for our own purposes, but also to be undermined."³³ We must surely try to put Merton into conversation with postmodern thinkers, but more importantly we should be pulling our own weight in the conversation, not speaking for Merton, but speaking from our own contemplative experience. Merton is certainly a splendid role model to learn from as we move to dialogue with our contemporaries and deepen our own experiences of reality.

Raising different questions is Philip Sheldrake in "Contemplation and Social Transformation: The Example of Thomas Merton," who prods us to consider mysticism and action in contrast to misinterpretations of interiority in Christian thought.³⁴ Sheldrake focuses upon Merton's notions of the interior true self and contemplation as providing the basis for what theologian David Tracy calls "a mystico-prophetic model" (Sheldrake 184). In regard to interiority, Sheldrake tries to show that its meaning for Augustine and other classical teachers is not the meaning we generally attribute to it to-

day, that is, a private, internal world all our own. In turn, the outer world, as it is conventionally understood, is not merely a public world in which one can reject one's role or obligation. In short, Sheldrake is opposing a privatized spirituality, opposing a "dichotomy between inner contemplation and outer life" (Sheldrake 187). Merton understood this well, and so helps us realize that the contemplative "has a strange and paradoxical power to confront a world infected by false consciousness" (Sheldrake 188). Sheldrake appreciates Merton's contribution to our thought on social transformation from a contemplative perspective but, rightly, does not see him as unique for the reason that he is actually a contemporary representative of a long-standing tradition of Western mysticism. Referring to John Ruusbroec and Evelyn Underhill as examples, Sheldrake argues that the "one defining characteristic of Christian mysticism is that union with God impels a person towards an active, outward, rather than purely passive, inward life" (Sheldrake 189). He concludes by discussing recent theologies and theologians such as the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Dorothee Sölle and Rowan Williams, as reflecting this view, realizing that the mystical self can only act in the world out of its center in God, enabling social transformation. Sheldrake gives us one more significant reason for appreciating Merton as a mystic of hope.

Kathleen Deignan provides more food for our thoughts regarding Merton's contemplative message of transformation in connection to the ecology of our world in "'Love for the Paradise Mystery': Thomas Merton, Contemplative Ecologist."³⁵ Deignan declares Merton's love for the paradise mystery was a dominant motif through all his writings and that "Merton spent his whole monastic life teaching ways to awaken the paradise mind by the practice of contemplation" (Deignan 546). Deignan spends time informing the reader of Merton's naturalist sensibilities and how Merton, a "paradise mystic," learned "that the quest for paradise was an explicitly Cistercian habit of heart" (Deignan 551). She concludes that Merton's legacy is "not simply a rapturous poetics about creation but also a disturbing challenge to humankind's unconscionable irresponsibility regarding our stewardship" of earth (Deignan 554-55). Deignan explores the *Rule of Benedict* for additional assistance in linking an eco-monastic perspective with an eco-spirituality perspective. As Deignan argues, "The wisdom of Benedictine teaching and practice in our time of planetary crisis may be evolving into its most mature and necessary expression, and

Merton remains its most prophetic interpreter" (Deignan 559). She concludes by building on Merton's hope for lay contemplatives in the world to realize their identity as contemplative change agents in helping humanity rediscover its lost true self as an integral part of the cosmos.

The final three articles to be considered are by authors who have devoted much time and energy to ecumenism, each inspired by Merton in some way. The first, by John Wu, Jr., is entitled "Thomas Merton's Inclusivity and Ecumenism: Silencing the Gongs and Cymbals."³⁶ Wu describes Merton as "unwittingly committed . . . to the search for truth in a life of dialogue," whose "secret" lay in the fact that "he did not regard other traditions as alien but integral to what he recognized as a unified human legacy that we all – without exception – rightfully share" (Wu 28). Wu wonders if there has ever been a writer who has taken the oneness of humanity as seriously as Merton. Merton accomplished this, Wu argues, by paradoxically taking his own faith exclusively seriously, which naturally thrust him into "the waiting arms of other traditions" (Wu 29). Merton valued and emphasized experience as being just as important as theology, and believed "that no matter what differences lay between traditions, there are universal links that will make dialogue not only possible but necessary and inevitable" (Wu 31). Wu compares Merton to "the ancients" who perceived the necessity of "uniting action with what is deepest in each of us, a contemplative vision based on love and compassion" (Wu 33). Merton's appeal, writes Wu, is that he challenged others to see things through a universal prism, to adopt a universal consciousness. Ecumenism for Merton is argued to have been an ongoing process of learning how to live. Looking to Merton, Wu ponders: "the fundamental question that haunts us is: What exactly constitutes wisdom in an age of unprecedented technological innovations and fashion that find their demise the moment they hit the market?" (Wu 43). The lesson Wu says we need to learn from Merton concerns our own radical reeducation to regain an understanding of the roots of life. Wu concludes beautifully: "How wondrous in such an ordinary day, he shows – *without showing* – how to live close to the flesh, to bridge that wounded brokenness that separates us from ourselves and the rest of creation in a niche – his hermitage, the only earthly home he could claim his own – which, because given by the Creator, has a manifestly universal *feel* to it" (Wu 46).

Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland, OSB takes us back to Mer-

ton's involvement in an ecumenical conference in Bangkok on the last day of his life in a Fortieth Anniversary Memorial essay for *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, entitled "Thomas Merton's Bangkok Lecture of December 1968."³⁷ Weakland, who attended Merton's final lecture and was a member of the planning committee for the conference itself, shares his memories of the context and events of this significant occasion. He goes into detail concerning the confusion, and resistance, that many felt in attending a conference on ecumenism. The Archbishop's stated intention in recalling these factors "is to point out that perhaps we were expecting too much of Merton's talk in opening up the question and clarifying it for this diverse crowd" (Weakland 94). Weakland helps the reader appreciate the context of Merton's presentation by providing information about other talks and lectures and how they were received by the audience. One feels, however, the drama nearing climax as the audience anticipates Merton's address. Curiously though, immediately after Merton's presentation, the planners reacted negatively to the talk on Marxism, feeling as if Merton had "hijacked" the conference, for he did not touch on the conference theme at all or follow through in meeting expectations. Furthermore, Merton did not seem to be reading from his notes, but rather delivering an off-the-cuff speech that confused the confused even more. Weakland later speculates that Dom Jean Leclercq, also present and who had addressed the conferees earlier, may have slightly misled Merton through correspondence as to what Merton's subject area should be, which had not been within the planners' original scope. Weakland does not go into any depth about Merton's death, preferring to focus on the immediate confusion surrounding Merton's address, but he is quite clear that "what had been a conference begun on a theoretical level turned into a shared experience" (Weakland 96). Prayers and silent vigils became the focus of the gathering after Merton's death "as the group coalesced as never before and the death of Merton gave new meaning to their reflections, certainly the result of a common human and spiritual bond that his death had created among the participants" (Weakland 96). His death somehow communicated what the conference had actually been about: communion. And in hindsight, that's what Merton was talking about.

Someone who knows a great deal about ecumenism, particularly between Catholics and Orthodox in Poland, is Waclaw Hryniewicz. In the final article under a review here, a chapter from

his book *The Challenge of Our Hope: Christian Faith in Dialogue*, he discusses Merton in favorable comparison to Julian of Norwich in writing about the links between mystics, hope and universal salvation.³⁸ One can find in this beautiful essay one of the most accurate and eloquent descriptions in modern times of what being a mystic entails. Because Hryniewicz's essay connects so many of the above articles as well as major themes of this bibliographic essay, I feel compelled to allow him to speak at length from the beginning of his chapter on Merton and Julian:

Great spiritual culture is shaped by people who are open, capable of understanding and compassionate of others. Mystics belong to this category. They can cross over religious and confessional divisions. A mystic is far from being a bitter recluse, devoid of any sense of human solidarity. Quite the opposite, his spiritual experience allows him to find the deepest bonds between people. He is able to discover that beauty, which is a herald of their ultimate rescue and transformation. Those who read thoroughly the witness of the mystics will find in it a rejection of all fundamentalisms or narrowness of spirit. They will discover mercy and compassion encompassing all people and all creatures. In this witness there is a great wisdom of the view of the world and the human lot, wisdom releasing from exclusivism and overconfidence in oneself. This wisdom is born out of a deep experience of community among people. (Hryniewicz 91)

Hryniewicz begins with a study of Julian of Norwich and then turns his attention to Merton, identifying three phases in Merton's thought and writings that are very typical of mystics: "The untouched and 'virginal point' of humanity becomes a 'point of nothingness' and a symbol of extreme poverty in comparison to the Creator of all" (Hryniewicz 102). The article concludes with a treatment of a dominant theme in Hryniewicz's life's work, universal salvation, as he argues that Julian and Merton, in their own lives and words as mystics, hoped for universal salvation, too. Opposing universal salvation, according to Hryniewicz, is "an exclusiveness in understanding salvation and the authenticity of one's own religion" which he believes is "one of the motives leading to [a] most obstinate persistence in narrow and closed religious identity. It is also one of the main sources of the historical phenomenon of intolerance and modern fundamentalism" (Hryniewicz 106). The

thrust of the article is that the mystic's hope lay in the eventual universal receptiveness of the contemplative's message of union with God. Any distraction from this hope leads to the narrowing of attention, identity and mercy.

Conclusion

In closing, all the works examined above (except one) embrace Merton's contemplative message and continue to honor his legacy by approaching his writings as a resource for those who suffer and as a model of education in a distracted and fragmented world. Merton is regarded as a monk, poet and mystic who steadfastly continues to influence countless others in regard to our needs to transform culture, commune with each other as human persons, and heal our relations with this earth. Far from being misperceived as a tragic figure of despair, Merton remains appreciated as model of openness, wholeness, compassion and hope.

Social critic Mark Slouka has warned us about the "ever diminishing role played by the natural world in our lives" that parallels the "gradual erosion of the soul's habit" or what could be referred to as "the terrain of the spirit – by which I mean the domain of silence, of solitude, of unmediated contemplation – is everywhere under siege, threatened by a polymorphous flood of verbal and visual signals (electronically generated, predominantly corporate), that together comprise what we might call the culture of distraction."³⁹ Given our daily experience in a culture of distraction, it is good to know that the vibrant contemplative message of Thomas Merton is as strong as ever forty years after his death. But what seems most pressing to me is our own need to learn from Merton how we ourselves should live contemplatively in dialogue with the world today as authentic mystics of hope.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 297; subsequent references will be cited as "NSC" parenthetically in the text.

2. Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2008) 13; subsequent references will be cited as "Jackson" parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, "The Contemplative Life in the Modern World," *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 216; subsequent references

will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text.

4. Among works published in 2008 that, along with Jackson's *Distracted*, present popular social commentary on the changing cultural world in which action trumps contemplation, see: Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2008); Nicholas Carr, *The Big Switch* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008); Lee Siegel, *Against the Machine* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2008).

5. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003) 7; subsequent references will be cited as "IE" parenthetically in the text.

6. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008); subsequent references will be cited as "ICM" parenthetically in the text.

7. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961) 15; subsequent references will be cited as "NM" parenthetically in the text.

8. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) iv; subsequent references will be cited as "MZM" parenthetically in the text.

9. Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer*, tr. John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981) 35.

10. Fernando Beltrán Llavador and Paul M. Pearson, eds., *Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's Contemplative Message / Semillas de Esperanza: El Mensaje Contemplativo de Thomas Merton* (Cobreces: Cistercium-Ciem, 2008); subsequent references will be cited as "*Seeds of Hope*" parenthetically in the text.

11. Fernando Beltrán Llavador, "Thomas Merton and 'the Great Feast of Christian Hope,'" (*Seeds of Hope* 11).

12. Erlinda Páguio, "Hope as an Unexpected, Incomprehensible and Total Gift: Reflections on Merton's Life and Writings" (*Seeds of Hope* 128).

13. James Conner, OCSO, "A Monk of Compassion, A Man of Paradox" (*Seeds of Hope* 154).

14. Jim Conner, Bonnie Thurston and David Scott, *The Voice of the Stranger* (Somerset, UK: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2008); subsequent references will be cited as "*Voice*" parenthetically in the text.

15. Thomas Merton, "A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 82 (subsequent references will be cited as "*ESF*" parenthetically in the text); see also Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 384; subsequent references will be cited as "*CP*"

parenthetically in the text.

16. Thomas Merton, *A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper One, 2008).

17. Thomas Merton and Edward Deming Andrews, *A Meeting of Angels: The Correspondence of Thomas Merton with Edward Deming & Faith Andrews*, ed. Paul M. Pearson (Frankfort, KY: Broadstone Books, 2008); subsequent references will be cited as "MA" parenthetically in the text.

18. Thomas Merton, *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers*, ed. Paul M. Pearson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003).

19. Patricia A. Burton, with Albert Romkema, *More Than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008); subsequent references will be cited as "Burton" parenthetically in the text.

20. Joseph M. Kramp, "Merton's Melancholia: Mother, Monasticism, Contemplative Prayer, and the Religion of Honor," *Pastoral Psychology* 55 (January 2007) 307-19; "Merton's Melancholia: Margie, Monasticism and the Religion of Hope," *Pastoral Psychology* 55 (March 2007) 441-58 (subsequent references will be cited as "Kramp, 'Melancholia [2]'" parenthetically in the text); "The Suicide of Thomas Merton: Moral Narcissism, Contemplative Prayer, and the Religion of Humor," *Pastoral Psychology* 55 (May 2007): 619-35 (subsequent references will be cited as "Kramp, 'Suicide'" parenthetically in the text).

21. Donald Capps, *Men and Their Religion: Honor, Hope, and Humor* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002); see also Donald Capps, *Men, Religion, and Melancholia: James, Otto, Jung, and Erikson* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997). In 2008, Capps published *Jesus the Village Psychiatrist* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

22. Kramp does admit that contemplative prayer allowed Merton to make contributions to the general well-being of others, but at the cost of his life. Try as I did, I was never able to discern Kramp's understanding of contemplative prayer, but it, as well as Merton's life as a contemplative monk, were deemed negative factors in Merton's tragic life, according to Kramp.

23. Joseph Urgo, *In the Age of Distraction* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); subsequent references will be cited as "Urgo" parenthetically in the text.

24. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 18.

25. Paul Kline, "Merton's 'True Self': A Resource for Survivors of Sexual Abuse by Priests," *Pastoral Psychology* 55 (July 2007) 731-39; subsequent references will be cited as "Kline" parenthetically in the text.

26. John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, "Thomas Merton: Monk and Contemplative," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 43.4 (Winter 2008) 391-408;

subsequent references will be cited as "Bamberger" parenthetically in the text.

27. John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, "Editor's Note," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 43.4 (Winter 2008) 378.

28. Patrick F. O'Connell, "'The Surest Home is Pointless': A Pathless Path through Thomas Merton's Poetic Corpus," *Cross Currents* 58.4 (December 2008) 522-44; subsequent references will be cited as "O'Connell" parenthetically in the text.

29. Gerald Twomey, "'Tools in the Hand of God': Thomas Merton's Influence on Henri J. M. Nouwen," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 43.4 (Winter 2008) 409-26; "'Tools in the Hand of God': Thomas Merton's Influence on Henri J. M. Nouwen (part two)," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 44.1 (Spring 2009) 1-20 (subsequent references will be cited as "Twomey [2]" parenthetically in the text). I should note in passing that Victor Kramer, former editor of *The Merton Annual*, also had an article in the same issue in which Twomey's and Bamberger's appear, but it is not reviewed in this bibliographic essay essentially because Kramer's essay is a review of two books already reviewed in *The Merton Annual: Merton's Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2006) and *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (both edited by Patrick O'Connell).

30. Richard J. Hauser, SJ, "Thomas Merton's Legacy: A Personal Reflection," *Review for Religious* 67.4 (2008) 342-57; subsequent references will be cited as "Hauser" parenthetically in the text.

31. David A. King, "'Fine and Dangerous': Teaching Merton," *Cross Currents* 59.1 (March 2009) 69-87; subsequent references will be cited as "King" parenthetically in the text.

32. Melvyn Matthews, "Thomas Merton: Postmodernist *Avant La Lettre*?" *The Merton Journal* 15.2 (Advent 2008) 25-30; subsequent references will be cited as "Matthews" parenthetically in the text.

33. Bernard McGinn, "Introduction," *Isaac of Stella: Sermons on the Christian Year*, Volume I (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1979) x.

34. Philip Sheldrake, "Contemplation and Social Transformation: The Example of Thomas Merton," *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 11 (2008) 181-207; subsequent references will be cited as "Sheldrake" parenthetically in the text.

35. Kathleen Deignan, "'Love for the Paradise Mystery': Thomas Merton, Contemplative Ecologist," *Cross Currents* 58.4 (December 2008) 545-69; subsequent references will be cited as "Deignan" parenthetically in the text.

36. John Wu, Jr., "Thomas Merton's Inclusivity and Ecumenism: Silencing the Gongs and Cymbals," *Cross Currents* 59.1 (March 2009) 28-48; subsequent references will be cited as "Wu" parenthetically in the text.

37. Rembert G. Weakland, OSB, "Thomas Merton's Bangkok Lecture

of December 1968," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 28 (2008) 91-99; subsequent references will be cited as "Weakland" parenthetically in the text.

38. Waclaw Hryniewicz, "Western Mystics and the Hope of Universal Salvation: Julian of Norwich and Thomas Merton," *The Challenge of Our Hope: Christian Faith in Dialogue* (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2007) 91-109; subsequent references will be cited as "Hryniewicz" parenthetically in the text.

39. Mark Slouka, "In Praise of Silence and Slow Time: Nature and Mind in a Derivative Age," *Tolstoy's Dictaphone: Technology and the Muse*, ed. Sven Birkerts (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 1996) 148.