

# Beholding New Things and Reconciling All Things: A Bibliographic Review of 2019

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*Joseph Quinn Raab*

“So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

2 Corinthians 5:17-18

## Introduction

As the Coronavirus rages, recall that Thomas Merton lived through the global devastation of the Spanish flu. As our world continues to shrink by virtue of the algorithmic silos of the internet and social media, remember that the remote world became proximate to him through the advent of air travel and the mass-media innovations of radio and television. While the Black Lives Matter movement gains widening support among white allies, marvel at Merton’s *avant garde* criticism of systemic racism, and his alliance with Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin and Malcolm X. Who among us cannot see in Thomas Merton’s own life and times a not-too-distant mirror of our own? So much *déjà vu* may tempt us to say, with fatalistic bitterness, the words of Qoheleth, “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Nevertheless, amidst the predictable redundancy of *chronos*, there is the surprising freshness of *kairos* – “behold, new things have come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

From the perspective of this transformed and redeemed time, Merton still denounces falsities and decries injustices, but not as a finger-wagging moralist. Rather, by sharing his own struggle for personal authenticity and social transformation, he walks along the hopeful road. His life bears witness to his hope in the coming reign of love and justice, inspiring others to take up the cross of that persistent struggle. He encourages us to embrace the challenge to become our better selves and to make a better world. While he continues to render a ministry of reconciliation through his writings, we continue to learn from his example, to amplify his voice and to raise the lantern that lights his conscience. Once again, 2019 was a year in which many authors looked to the life and work of Merton to consider our current challenges from the vista of the new horizons he had helped to open. They find in him reliable guidance for how to “stand fast,

girded in truth and clothed with righteousness as a breastplate” against the threatening darkness of these troubling times (Ephesians 6:14).

### **Behold the Poet: Reconciling Truth and Language**

Whether it was in response to Nazis scapegoating Jews in the 1930s, or to the U.S. masking the horrors of Vietnam in the 1960s, Merton prophetically denounced the desecration of language, attuned as he was to the ways propaganda veiled truth, manipulated masses and blocked communication.<sup>1</sup> Poetry, however, provided Merton a medicine for the sickness of denatured language. In 2019 Sonia Petisco Martinez and Fernando Beltrán Llavador collaborated on two illuminating articles published in *The Merton Journal* that explored Merton’s efforts “to give language another chance” by recovering paradise through poetry. In “‘Unseen until Words End’: Rethinking Language with Thomas Merton”<sup>2</sup> Martinez and Beltrán reference the 2016 film *Arrival*, in which “the protagonist struggles to decode the language of alien visitors” only to find out that their language functioned not to categorize, divide or explain things, but to induce a contemplative state revealing the unity and nature of things (59-60). The authors use *Arrival* as a backdrop for exploring the ways Merton diagnosed the crisis of language and the way he used art and poetry to transcend the binaries that exile and alienate, and move into a silence that is “more like an arrival at where and who we long to be” (65). In their second piece, “Harkening to the Silent Word,”<sup>3</sup> the authors examine that creative and tortuous tension between utterance and silence that tore at Merton until he was finally able to accept it, and then they dive into some of the poetry that flowed out of him from it. Tuning in to Merton’s *sapiential* voice, they examine several poems that effectively function like the symbols of the alien’s language in *Arrival*, not imposing categories and labels, but revealing the hidden wholeness and the given gate of heaven.

In “‘Little Prayers’ and the Bluebird: Thomas Merton on Haiku,” Richard Straw accomplishes more than expected given the fact that Merton did not compose poetry in this Japanese form.<sup>4</sup> Inspired by the fact that Merton included a “Haiku Section” in his final issue of *Monks Pond*, Straw considers the way the sparse and naked observations of nature

1. See Joseph Q. Raab, “Madness and Meaning: Thomas Merton’s Reading of Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault and the Babble of the 1960s,” *The Merton Seasonal* 44.3 (Fall 2019) 7-14.

2. Sonia Petisco Martinez and Fernando Beltrán Llavador, “‘Unseen until Words End’: Rethinking Language with Thomas Merton,” *The Merton Journal* 26.1 (Easter 2019) 58-67.

3. Sonia Petisco Martinez and Fernando Beltrán Llavador, “Harkening to the Silent Word,” *The Merton Journal* 26.2 (Advent 2019) 52-64.

4. Richard S. Straw, “‘Little Prayers’ and the Bluebird: Thomas Merton on Haiku,” *Haibun Today* 13.1 (March 2019); available at: [http://haibuntoday.com/ht131/A\\_Straw\\_LittlePrayers.html](http://haibuntoday.com/ht131/A_Straw_LittlePrayers.html).

often found in Haiku resonate with Merton's own style, and his ability, as he counseled Ron Seitz, to "stop looking and start seeing." Much of the essay considers Merton's influence on Seitz and on Jerry Gill, two poets who do write Haikus and who both knew Merton well. Jerry Gill, in an email to Straw, insightfully observed that if Merton had used the form, his style "would have been simpler and less lofty – more about birds and snakes in the woodpile. . . . He would have been more like Issa than Basho." Straw and Gill both bemusedly note how Merton read Haiku as if it were explicitly a Zen form of poetry, which is not actually the case, but then again Zen was, for Merton, a way of looking at everything.

Several poems from Merton's *The Tears of the Blind Lions* received careful attention in 2019. In "Thomas Merton and the Curious Case of the 1950 Pulitzer Prize" by John Smelcer and Paul Pearson, readers learn the story of how Merton's shortest collection of poems had been short-listed as a candidate for the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.<sup>5</sup> This fact was largely unknown until a letter from Henry Seidel Canby, a member of the 1950 Pulitzer Prize Advisory Committee, to Carl Ackerman, who was Dean of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, recently resurfaced containing the list of finalists for the prize and *The Tears of the Blind Lions* was on it!

Merton's little collection did not win the big prize, but two poems from that book, "Saint Malachy" and "From the Legend of Saint Clement," did win a more modest one. In "A Pair of Prized November Saints: Two Poems from Thomas Merton's *The Tears of the Blind Lions*," Patrick F. O'Connell closely examines those two poems "to get some idea as to why" the editorial committee of *Poetry*, a prestigious journal with a largely secular audience, considered them worthy of the Harriet Monroe Memorial Prize, named for *Poetry*'s founding editor.<sup>6</sup> After a masterful exegesis of the poems, revealing their depth and, often, their humor, O'Connell concludes that Merton likely surprised his readers by offering vividly "imaginative and daringly revisionist alternatives to conventional hagiographical portraits" (423). In a separate article, "Old World, New Priest: Thomas Merton's '*Senescente Mundo*'," O'Connell interprets the final poem from that same collection which centers on the priestly sacrifice.<sup>7</sup> O'Connell finds in this mesmerizing and eschatological meditation Merton's perception of a dying world, violent and apparently nihilistic, and his faithful vision of a newness arriving, and somehow already pres-

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5. John Smelcer with Paul M. Pearson, "Thomas Merton and the Curious Case of the 1950 Pulitzer Prize," *Ragazine* 15.2 (March-April 2019); available at: <http://www.ragazine.cc/2019/05/thomas-merton-pulitzer-nod-john-smelcer-paul-pearson>.

6. Patrick F. O'Connell, "A Pair of Prized November Saints: Two Poems from Thomas Merton's *The Tears of the Blind Lions*," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 54.4 (2019) 407-23.

7. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Old World, New Priest: Thomas Merton's '*Senescente Mundo*,'" *The Merton Journal* 26.2 (Advent 2019) 3-12.

ent, in the mysterious heart of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

### **Behold the Prophet: Reconciling Persons through Truth and Justice**

After the fall of Apartheid, the new South Africa had the foresight to set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in an effort to face squarely the injustices of the past and to move the country forward through restorative justice practices. In the United States, however, there has never been a whole-scale effort to face America's racist history. Ibram X. Kendi recently exposed what he called the "dueling forces of progress" that continue to fight it out on the stage of American history, where *racist progress toward inequality* invariably follows any *racial progress toward equality*.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Kendi has argued that since there is no reconciling racist and antiracist policies, the latter must supplant the former.<sup>9</sup> Not surprisingly, then, several Merton scholars looked to Thomas Merton in 2019 for guidance on how to be an antiracist minister of reconciliation, finding in Merton an antiracist person who worked for a reconciliation of *persons*, unconditionally affirming the dignity of all.

Alex Mikulich takes up the critique of white racism in his article "Catholic Social Teaching and Race: Embracing Racial Intimacy."<sup>10</sup> In the section titled "Racism without Racists, or Elegant Racism" Mikulich describes in detail how even in the absence of discriminatory laws or overt acts of racial animus, systemic racism still flourishes, limiting access to housing, equal education and employment opportunities, and resulting in disproportionately high conviction rates for blacks and instances of police brutality against them. Drawing on insights from Bryan Massingale and M. Shawn Copeland, and featuring a sustained reflection on Merton's *Seeds of Destruction*, Mikulich offers an urgent call to white Christians to practice genuine solidarity with black and brown brothers and sisters. This solidarity risks the renunciation of privilege and welcomes, if necessary, the blows of batons. The courage to do what is necessary to overcome systemic racism, Mikulich argues, can come from the contemplative practice modeled by Merton, which is not a flight from the world but a critical engagement with it, and a committed love of truth and of one's neighbor.

Daniel P. Horan has emerged as one of the more insightful translators of Merton's prophetic vision as it applies to contemporary American

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8. See Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Hachette, 2016).

9. See Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019).

10. Alex Mikulich, "Catholic Social Teaching and Race: Embracing Racial Intimacy," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 16.1 (Winter 2019) 65-81.

society and to western culture more broadly. In his essay “Beyond Bystanding: Thomas Merton’s Guidance in an Age of Trump and Brexit,”<sup>11</sup> Horan deftly surmises Merton’s turning toward the world as a powerful prophet in his own times, and elevates Merton as a wisdom figure and guide who models a genuine Christian witness today “in the midst of cultures of separation, discrimination, and fear and violence.” In another brief reflection, “Thomas Merton’s Counsel for Donald Trump (and Us),”<sup>12</sup> Horan employs Merton’s distinction between true self and false self as a way of pointing out the “ever-widening gap between Trump’s self-presentation” as a wildly successful business man “and the reality” we are learning more about as Trump’s tax information begins to come to light. Resisting the temptation to marginalize Trump as an outlier, Horan reminds us that the duplicity writ large in the public figure of the POTUS is a duplicity we all must contend with, foremost in ourselves. Finally, in the more richly developed book chapter, “A Spirituality of Resistance: Thomas Merton on the Violence of Structural Racism,”<sup>13</sup> Horan credibly and convincingly illustrates how Merton’s writings on race anticipate and critique what Derrick Bell, Jr., an early founder of Critical Race Theory, would later term “Interest Convergence.” Horan reminds us that Merton had been critical of white allies in the civil rights movement who wanted a kind of integration that amounted to a successful assimilation for blacks into a white culture that preserved white privilege; but were not so much interested in the actual empowerment of black people and socio-economic equality or parity. Horan then illustrates how Bell, a legal scholar, argued that the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was not the result of the powerful elites acquiring empathy, but only became possible when the interests of “elite whites (politicians, business owners, etc.) converged with the long standing interests of the oppressed” (122). When privileged elites juridically grant human rights to the oppressed only when it is economically or politically advantageous to themselves, “justice” becomes a euphemism for what is convenient, and the underlying systemic injustices can continue to hide in plain sight. It seems obvious that America retains a strongly embedded culture of white

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11. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, “Beyond Bystanding: Thomas Merton’s Guidance in an Age of Trump and Brexit,” *The Merton Journal* 26.2 (Advent 2019) 16-27.

12. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, “Thomas Merton’s Counsel for Donald Trump (and Us): All of Us, Including the President, Struggle with Our True and False Selves,” *National Catholic Reporter* 55.19 (28 June-11 July 2019) 17.

13. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, “A Spirituality of Resistance: Thomas Merton on the Violence of Structural Racism in America,” in *American Catholicism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Crossroads, Crisis, or Renewal?* edited by Benjamin T. Peters and Nicholas Rademacher (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018) 189-200.

supremacy, even as many white Americans still refuse to acknowledge it, which means Merton remains a disturbingly prescient critical voice today.

In her powerful and penetrating essay, “From Birmingham, Alabama to Birmingham, UK,” Farai Mapamula, “a black African female Christian Minister resident in Britain,” reflects on the intersections between racial violence in 1960s Alabama and the rising bigotry and xenophobia in post-Brexit Referendum Britain.<sup>14</sup> Thoughtfully drawing on Merton’s poetry and prose, James Baldwin’s diagnosis of white fragility and her own experience of overt racism, Mapamula points to a way out of the perpetual cycle of racial injustice and racial violence. Along with Merton and Dr. King, she exhorts us to follow the “Law of Love” so that we might learn to “travel beyond, even against, our natural instincts and affiliations, beyond any need for dominance, victory, or defeat” (41).

In “Thomas Merton and the Deep Amerindian Past,”<sup>15</sup> Peter Ellis highlights four key insights that Merton gained through his own study of the colonization of Amerindian cultures. Without detailing each of the four here, it is sufficient to say that through his studies Merton came to see so-called “savages” as human beings and white settlers as “barbarians.” Colonialism resulted in the near genocide of “peoples of oral cultures,” and the failure of colonizers to listen to those people, Ellis argues, stemmed from and reinforced their false and crippling anthropology. Ellis suggests that through his modest forays into Yahi, Crow and Mayan cultural studies, Merton more clearly saw the limitations of western conceptions of human nature that emerge by subtracting anything other than human and ignoring whatever seems accidental rather than substantial to human uniqueness (18). Ellis shows that Merton discovered how this impoverished and reductionist view of human nature needs expansion and healing from cultures whose views of human beings are more open to transcendent mystery and enchantment, and more integrated with ancestors and the natural environment. Ellis briefly but convincingly shows how these insights informed Merton’s own developing anthropology, one more intersubjective and cosmically interconnected.

In her book, *The Relevance of Thomas Merton’s Spirituality for the Consecrated Life in India*, Fabian Jose introduces Merton’s spirituality of prophetic mysticism, a faith in the service of social justice, to an Indian audience as a model for confronting social evils in India’s multi-religious

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14. Farai Mapamula, “From Birmingham, Alabama to Birmingham, UK,” *The Merton Journal* 26.1 (Easter 2019) 34-42.

15. Peter Ellis, “Thomas Merton and the Deep Amerindian Past,” *The Merton Journal* 26.1 (Easter 2019) 13-21.



context.<sup>16</sup> Originating as a doctoral thesis at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, this is an exceptionally readable and profitably insightful application of Merton's justice-oriented spirituality. Jose utilizes Merton as a guide to confront India's problems of extremist Hindu fundamentalism (Hindutva) (156-57), caste/class divisions and poverty (158-60, 181-83) and the patriarchal oppression of women (183-85). She also speaks prophetically to the Catholic Church in India, as its parochial schools too often align with and serve the interests of elites and its efforts to realize a genuinely Indian Catholicism too often fall short (176-78). Regarding the last point, it is hard to miss the awkward irony of the book's cover art (chosen by the publisher?) featuring a prominent blond-haired Jesus dressed in priestly robes towering above an assortment of tiny people of color adorned in striped or plaid shirts, or pink or purple saris. Kitschy cover aside, this work of laudable scholarship reveals Jose's ability to draw inspiration and guidance from the American Trappist to engage prophetically the issues facing her India, and her Church in India, today.

### **Behold the Mystic: Reconciling Religious Divisions**

The fallen world divides people not only along racial lines but also along religious ones. Merton's reconciling efforts extended to include, as Pope Francis pointed out, building bridges and promoting peace among peoples and religions.<sup>17</sup> Once again, 2019 was a year in which authors explored, or simply recalled, Merton's ministry of reconciliation as it pertains to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and the building of human community across religious boundaries. Jaechan Anselmo Park's *Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond*<sup>18</sup> offered a most substantive investigation in this arena. As a Korean, Benedictine monk, Park brings a unique perspective to the study of Merton's engagement with Buddhism. However, the strength of Park's book is not that it sheds new light on Merton's engagement with Buddhism *per se*, but that it masterfully contextualizes, in the latter part of the book, Merton's pivotal importance and lasting legacy in the broader arena of the Catholic Church's official efforts of interreligious dialogue since Vatican II. David Orberon, a Merton scholar who has written about the influence of Zen

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16. Fabian Jose, UMI, *The Relevance of Thomas Merton's Spirituality for the Consecrated Life in India: Refueling to Confront the Social Evils in the Interreligious Context* (New Delhi, India: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth/Christian World Imprints, 2019).

17. Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father to a Joint Session of the United States Congress – September 24, 2015," *The Merton Annual* 28 (2015) 21.

18. Jaechan Anselmo Park, *Thomas Merton's Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond: His Interreligious Dialogue, Inter-Monastic Exchanges, and Their Legacy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019).

on Merton's theodicy,<sup>19</sup> reviews Park's book in the following section.

Harold Talbott's memoir, *Tendrel*,<sup>20</sup> appeared in 2019 just before he passed away from complications due to Parkinson's disease. This beautifully written and compassionate account recalls Talbott's own spiritual journey from agnosticism into Christian mysticism, then into Tibetan Buddhism; and geographically from New York to the Himalayas. Merton readers know Talbott as Merton's guide and contact for the Dalai Lama from *The Asian Journal*, but from Talbott we learn about their meeting earlier, in 1958, when Talbott had ventured to Gethsemani for his own Confirmation and First Communion (see 66-72). Talbott recalls that Merton came and knocked on his door in the guesthouse afterwards and said to him: "I am always very glad to meet someone who has just come into the church, because they're full of grace, and the grace overflows on me. I have only one thing to say to you, the church is a very big place. Always remember go your own way in it" (72).

*Tendrel* fills out the picture of Talbott's connection with Merton through their mutual friend, Dom Aelred Graham, and highlights Graham's influence on Talbott's journey both into Catholicism and then to Tibetan Buddhism. Chapter 13 of Talbott's memoir (168-77) specifically focuses on Merton. But it's in the rest of the book that the reader meets Talbott intimately; and surely will be delighted to discover the providential ways this urbane, openly gay, aristocratic intellectual became not only an accomplished scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, but one who had tasted *Dzogchen*, and dedicated himself to its study for more than fifty years. Ironically, Talbott credits Merton, the one who told him to remember how big a tent the church is, with leading Talbott to study with the *Dzogchen* masters (see 285). Talbott's total immersion into Buddhism meant that he had not been practicing Catholicism for decades, but even as he wrote his memoir near the end of his life he still found himself loving the church, and recognizing a "residue of the old faith" alive in him (234).

A late publication from 2018, Charlotte Radler's "And So the Prajña Eye Sees a Wide, Impregnable Country: Communal Spirituality in Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, Margaret Farley, and Mahayana Buddhism"<sup>21</sup> deserves mentioning in the context of Buddhist-Christian dialogue. This

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19. David Orberon, *Thomas Merton – Evil and Why We Suffer: From Purified Soul Theodicy to Zen* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018).

20. Harold Talbott, *Tendrel: A Memoir of New York and the Buddhist Himalayas* (Marion, MA: Buddhayana Foundation, 2019) (N.B. *Tendrel* is a Tibetan term that means "interdependent relation" and names the "nature" of all contingent being or phenomena).

21. Charlotte C. Radler, "And So the Prajña Eye Sees a Wide, Impregnable Country: Communal Spirituality in Meister Eckhart, Thomas Merton, Margaret Farley, and Mahayana Buddhism," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 38 (2018) 231-51.



insightful essay examines the ways each of these three Christian writers, from different social locations, arrives at anthropologies that undercut atomistic individualism and dualistic frameworks. Radler finds in Eckhart, Merton and Farley a nullification of a “reified, substantial self-identity and uncovers the kinship potential of a relational understanding of no-self” (231) and invites Buddhist discourse. The inclusion of Farley in her piece is most effective, as Radler shows that Farley’s feminist concern to preserve the value of autonomy cannot only be affirmed and respected but is actually essential for a truly relational anthropology grounded in the reality of inter-subjectivity.

In “Merton’s Last Epiphany?” Michael Plekon revisits Merton’s experience at Polonnaruwa, and some of the more recent scholarship regarding it.<sup>22</sup> By connecting the epiphany in Sri Lanka with some of Merton’s earlier epiphanies, and with his understanding of “final integration,” as informed by the work of Reza Arasteh, Plekon supports the conclusion that Merton was by no means leaving behind his Christian roots. He argues, instead, that Merton was completing and integrating a decades-long continuous and coherent pilgrimage that culminated in a Christocentric discovery of the gate of heaven exploding from the stone statues of the Buddhas in Gal Vihara. Plekon shows that this epiphany typifies Merton’s ability to reconcile in an integrated way the wisdom of non-Christian religious traditions.

Merton’s many friendships strengthened bonds not only across religious borderlines but also across denominational divides within the Christian family. Johnny Sears explores one dimension of this ecumenical work in the essay “Contemplation in a World of Action: Thomas Merton, Douglas Steere, E. Glenn Hinson, and the Academy of Spiritual Formation.”<sup>23</sup> Sears’ piece explores how the life and work of Hinson, a Baptist minister, intersected with Steere, the Quaker contemplative scholar and, of course, with Thomas Merton. The essay is also an homage to Hinson, whose influence on the author brought him to the works of Thomas Merton, and to the Academy of Spiritual Formation, which Hinson and Steere both helped to build. Sears currently directs the Academy, and from this position, he waxes on the designs of providence and illustrates “the mysterious workings of grace unfolding over time” in ways that produce abundant fruits in his own life and the lives of countless others.

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22. Michael Plekon, “Merton’s Last Epiphany?” *The Merton Journal* 26.1 (Easter 2019) 3-11.

23. Johnny Sears, “Contemplation in a World of Action: Thomas Merton, Douglas Steere, E. Glenn Hinson, and the Academy of Spiritual Formation,” *Baptist History and Heritage* 53.1 (Spring 2018) 68-79.

### Conclusion

This bibliographic review has not explored all the materials from 2019 in which Merton gets attention. For example, Merton plays a prominent role in Jane Brox's *Silence*, an extended reflection on the positive and negative effects of silence, focusing on life in monasteries and in prisons,<sup>24</sup> and featuring as well the testimony of Joe Labriola, a member of the late John Collins' ITMS chapter in the Shirley, Massachusetts Correctional Facility, that first appeared in *The Merton Seasonal*.<sup>25</sup>

The following section of *The Merton Annual*'s individual reviews will help to fill out the picture more completely. Still, the authors aforementioned in this essay have shown us once again not only Merton's enduring relevance in the realm of *chronos*, but also his faith in Love's inbreaking *kairos*, instilling hope and widening the circles of compassion. Bernard Lonergan defined faith as "the knowledge born of love" and Merton was clearly a man of great faith. When faith wanes, the redundancy of *chronos* can feel like an affliction. However, the knowledge that Merton courageously and gracefully navigated such similar times as our own is a consolation of inestimable worth, enabling us to trust and rejoice in that reconciliation with God and with all created being – a reconciliation of which Merton was a tireless and faithful minister.

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24. Jane Brox, *Silence: A Social History of One of the Least Understood Elements of Our Lives* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019); see Christine M. Bochen's extensive review in the Spring 2021 issue of *The Merton Seasonal*.

25. See John P. Collins, Joe Labriola, Shawn Fisher, Timothy J. Muise, "Thomas Merton Comes to Prison," *The Merton Seasonal* 39.4 (Winter 2014) 3-7.