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Review of
An Asian Woman's Religious Journey with Thomas Merton:
A Journey To The East / A Journey To The West
by Jung Eun Sophia Park, SNJM
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Reviewed by **Christine M. Bochen**

As I was reading Sophia Park's book, I was reminded of Thomas Merton's words in his Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

> Therefore, most honorable reader, it is not as an author that I would speak to you, not as a story-teller, not as a philosopher, not as a friend only: I seek to speak to you, in some way, as your own self. Who can tell what this may mean? I myself do not know. But if you listen, things will be said that are perhaps not written in this book. And this will be due not to me, but to One who lives and speaks in both! (*"Honorable Reader"* 67)

Sophia Park shares what she has heard over many years of reading Merton as she has listened to the reverberations of Merton's words in her mind and heart and to the voice within her soul.
This book is one of eighteen volumes in the "Asian Christianity in the Diaspora" Series, published by Palgrave Macmillan between 2014 and 2022 "to bring to the forefront some of the important, provocative voices within Asian American Theology." Author Jung Eun Sophia Park, a member of the Sisters of Holy Names of Jesus and Mary and, until its closing in 2023, Associate Professor of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Holy Names University in California, has published books in English, including *Border Crossing Spirituality: Transformation in the Borderland* (2016) and *Conversation at the Well: Emerging Religious Life in the 21st-Century Global World* (2019), as well as several books in Korean. She was a plenary speaker at the Eighteenth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society in 2023.

As the title suggests, the author focuses on her spiritual journey – one in which Thomas Merton appears as inspiration and guide. In telling her story and reflecting on her journey, Sophia Park points to intersections between her life-experiences and Merton's, observing ways in which their

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experiences are similar and different. Acknowledging her debt to Merton, she regards herself as his beneficiary. Park's approach might best be characterized as that of an ardent, thoughtful, critical reader of Thomas Merton and the book as a memoir of a life, influenced in significant ways by Merton.

From the outset and throughout the book, Sophia Park elaborates on the identity she avows in the title of the book: that of "an Asian woman." She claims her "hybrid identity" (129) as a Korean woman residing in the US, an Asian immigrant and a Catholic woman religious, and writes as "an Asian-diasporic woman who seeks both God and her true self in a postcolonial and global era" (2). She speaks of herself as a "seeker" (126) and "stranger" (121) – images that describe Merton as well. Park's tone is conversational and, frequently, confessional. She is humble and candid, sharing her hopes and dreams as well as her vulnerabilities. Several elements shape her perspective, academically speaking: her formal study of Asian wisdom traditions; research and field work; her teaching in Humanities, Religious Studies and Interdisciplinary Studies at Holy Names University, San Francisco Theological Seminary and elsewhere; and her lived experience of Asian cultures and the Asian diaspora.

An Asian Woman's Religious Journey with Thomas Merton consists of eight chapters. The titles offer a preview of the contents of the book: 1. "Prologue"; 2. "A Portrait of Thomas Merton: Living as a Sojourner"; 3. "Contemplation: Being Poised at the Virgin Point"; 4. "Social Justice: Acting in Contemplation"; 5. "Intimacy: Learning to Love"; 6. "Spiritual Direction: Dancing with the Other"; 7. "Creativity: Gazing at Beauty"; 8. "The Journey to the East: Coming to Asia and Beyond"; 9. "Epilogue." Footnotes are kept to a minimum. Each chapter ends with a short bibliography – that generally includes a book or books by Merton, books about Merton and books by some of Park's favorite writers. There is a glossary (143-46) of eighteen terms, including Animus/Anima, Contemplation, The Emptiness, The Hermit, The Ten Ox Herding Pictures. In five or six lines, Park offers a definition or description and relates the term to Merton. The book concludes with a three-page index (147-49).

In the "Prologue" (1-11), Park explains her purpose in writing the book. Confessing that she is "a scholar of spirituality" and "not specifically a scholar of Merton," she admits that she has had a "complicated relationship with Merton and his writings." Writing this book was an opportunity to explore the tension between the "master narrative" of her life and a "significant, guiding counternarrative" – allowing her to "to find [her] identity and agency within an extensive tradition of social activism, commitment to social justice, and contemplation" (1). She likens the continuing influence of Merton's life and work on her own life to the footprints of *The Ten Bulls of Zen* (*The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures*) which depicts a boy's spiritual journey of discovering that "the true nature of self is the Buddha-nature" (2). Park first read Merton as a college student, beginning with *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Some years later, working as a flight attendant, she found herself in New York's Corpus Christi Church where Merton was baptized. As her life unfolded – work in journalism, a calling to become a woman religious, parish ministry, graduate studies, research field work – she continued to read Merton. His *Wisdom of the Desert* helped her to see the possibility of "*actions* [*sic*] *in contemplation*" (7). Merton's honesty about his own spiritual journey, his art and his exploration of Eastern spirituality helped her "find God in all places" (7). Inviting readers to dialogue with Merton as she did, Park concludes the prologue by previewing subsequent chapters.

Acknowledging that writers such as William H. Shannon, Michael Higgins and Robert Waldron offer "different viewpoints" on Merton's life, Park presents her own in chapter 2, "A Portrait of Thomas Merton: Living as a Sojourner" (13-21). For Park, Merton is the "sojourner" seeking a home, "a lonely traveler and outsider" (14). Park sketches Merton's life in broad strokes. Chapter sub-titles reveal something of her perspective on Merton's early years ("Merton the Dislocated"), his monastic years ("Being a Trappist Monk" and "Searching for Depth"), travel to Asia ("Journey Toward Home"). Attempting Merton's story in nine pages imposes its limits. There definitely are gaps for the reader to fill in.

In chapters 3 and 4, "Contemplation: Being Poised at the Virgin Point" (23-39) and "Social Justice: Acting in Contemplation" (41-62), Park takes up two central themes in Merton's life and writings: contemplation and social justice. The chapter on contemplation, sub-titled "Being Poised at the Virgin Point," begins in a novel way:

> Although there are several possible definitions for the term "contemplation," I most appreciate Thomas Merton's concept of the virgin point, *Le Point Vierge*, which means "semicolon" in French, and refers to the innermost end of ourselves where we encounter God. In grammar, the semicolon functions as a bridge that connects two independent sentences . . . . Thus, if we say contemplation, it can signify a liminal space. In the liminal or in-between space, the unspoken, undetermined, or unjudged soul encounters God and becomes ready to create a new meaning of self and others or to be born into a transformed being. (23)

Park appears to be confusing *point vierge* here with *point-virgule*, the French term for semi-colon. Nevertheless, she is reminding us of the beautiful passage in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in which Merton introduces readers to the term *point vierge*: "The first chirps of the waking day birds mark the '*point vierg*e' of the dawn under a sky as yet without real light, a moment of awe and inexpressible innocence, when the Father in perfect silence opens their eyes. . . . Then, they one by one wake up, and become birds" (117). A few pages later, cautioning that he cannot translate the expression *le point vierge*, Merton concludes the account of his epiphany at Fourth and Walnut this way: "At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God . . . . This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us" (142). Merton's own words say it best. As signaled by sub-titles – "My Being Contemplative," "Learning Contemplation in Religious Life," "Contemplation in the Rhythm of Convent Life," "Enjoying Beauty in the Convent," "Contemplation as Extension to the World" and "Contemplation as an Attitude to See the Mystery in the Ordinary Life," most of the chapter is Park's intimate account of discerning what her vocation and religious life entailed and a sharing of her experiences of prayer, beauty and epiphanic moments. Park learns that "contemplation is not just a noun or inaction, but an action of deep love" (29). Inspired by Merton, Park comes to see that "contemplation extends to a connection and communication with self, others, and God" (33).

In chapter 4, Park notes that she "was baptized into liberation theology in the 1980s" (41) and, in particular, was deeply influenced by the *Minjung* theology that emerged in Korea "among laborers,

college students, intellectuals, and theologians, who addressed and expressed Jesus's teachings in Korean society" (42). *Minjung* means "ordinary people" among whom Jesus dwells (42). Park explains that "*Minjung* theology merges spiritual practice and belief with acts of political resistance in the service of social justice" (42). But Park needed something more than Minjung theology offered and found it in Merton. Referencing John Dear, Park notes that Merton's "spirituality deals with the inner dimension of a faith seeker and the outer world simultaneously" (44). After noting how Merton was affected by the two World Wars and Vietnam War and how five of her mother's brothers died in the Korean War, Park reflects on conscientious disobedience and on her own struggle with the vow of obedience to her religious superiors in the face of injustices within Korean society. Having left her Korean religious order, she entered an American religious community, the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary, in 2006. Earning a doctorate in Christian spirituality, she began teaching at Holy Names University. She shares with readers what she has learned from Merton's teachings and her own struggle for social justice. She names three spiritual elements: (1) self-knowledge and self-acceptance; (2) inner freedom; (3) nonviolence toward oneself and others. She teaches her students "a social discernment model called the action–prayer cycle, which is: Preparation (study) – Immersion into the field (work) – Analysis (prayer and discernment for the next step)" (58). Park concludes with a three-point summary of Merton's spirituality of social justice: personalism, loving-kindness and joy and laughter (59-60).

The next four chapters highlight aspects of Merton's life and writings that resonate deeply with Sophia Park: intimacy, spiritual direction, creativity and his journey to the East. Merton's experience and thinking illuminate her own, leading her to "read Merton as though he were a dancing partner" (64). Merton's search for intimacy provides the context for relating and reflecting on her own story. The title of chapter 5, "Intimacy: Learning to Love" (63-82), echoes the title of the sixth volume of Merton's journals in which Merton documents the story of falling in love in 1966. Park views Merton's relationship with M. in a discussion of *anima*: "Through his dream [*sic*], he noticed four animas dwelling in his soul, and he named them the Hagia Sophia, the Chinese Princess, the Jewish Lady Proverb and the Southern African American Wet Nurse, respectively" (64). Park suggests that that M. "represented" and "embodied" Hagia Sophia (65). Turning to the subject of her own *animus*, Park recalls hearing an inner voice which offered her direction at significant moments in her journey. As she continues to reflect on Merton's relationship with M., she moves from initial reactions of suspicion and discomfort with the way the young Merton treated women to conclude: "When Merton was ready to face his vulnerability, he could embrace the other in the form of tender young feminine energy through loving M. He knew that the relationship would have to end and that he would continue to live as a monk, but he could not stop it. The situation itself included pain, but it also gave him the capacity to learn to love" (75). Park concludes the chapter on a personal note: "Now I am thinking of my intimacy with male and female friends, and, for me, it comes from God, who is the *eros*. For this I feel a deep sense of gratitude" (81).

Although Park credits Merton with laying a foundation for her understanding of spiritual direction, especially with *Wisdom of the Desert* and *Spiritual Direction and Meditation*, chapter 6, "Spiritual Direction: Dancing with the Other" (83-101), is very much about her own experience and practice as directee and director. "For me," she writes, "spiritual direction is a dance that embraces the other, no matter what kind of otherness the directee brings. Spiritual direction is a process

to become acclimated to each other's rhythms" (100). The chapter spans a host of topics: taboos in religious life (sexuality and sexual desire, spiritual friendships); the art of listening; and the importance of finding the right director. Park shares what she learned from directees: "felt like a privilege to walk into the mystery of God embodied in a person's soul" (96). But it was in writing about spiritual direction that she realized that the image of dance said it best.

In chapter 7, "Creativity: Gazing at Beauty" (103-17), Sophia Park calls attention to Thomas Merton's art – literary and visual – as an expression of his contemplative spirituality and prayer. "When I see his artworks, I feel a deep sense of joy, as well as his warm gaze upon objects, humans, and nature. . . . His words and visual art are a frank dialogue with God, revealing where he is and whom he is looking at, a medium grounded in freedom through which he seeks God" (105). As an example of Merton's poetry, Park points to his well-known and widely circulated prayer which begins with the line "O [*sic*] Lord God, I have no idea where I am going" (*Thoughts in Solitude* 83). As an international student, Park identified deeply with this prayer and continues to do so even as she enjoys poems by Naomi Shihab Nye, Mary Oliver and other women writers. Merton's drawings, photographs and calligraphies also speak to Park's heart. She finds the style of his drawings "similar to [that] of Eastern Buddhist Zen monks" (111) and like "*Seo Do* (Tao of painting with the brush)" in Korean culture (112). She appreciates his drawings of women figures and those of the Virgin Mary. His calligraphy speaks of "devotion, meditation, and breath" (114). Merton's photographs "dialogue" with her as a viewer (115). Merton taught Park, as he has taught many of us, how to see more deeply: "I walk into my urban life and its ordinary objects, all of which hold their own beauty. There, through this gaze, I can encounter the beauty of God, perhaps forgetting my noisy self" (116).

Chapter 8's title, "The Journey to the East: Coming to Asia and Beyond" (119-38), refers to Sophia Park's journey as well as Merton's. As a Korean, Park experienced a multi-religious culture marked by peaceful coexistence of Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism and Christianity. However, as a second-generation Catholic, she did not "seriously" encounter Eastern spirituality until she was studying Christian theology in the West (121). She found in Merton "a gentle guide who confirmed my journey" (122). Reading John C. H. Wu's *The Inner Paradise* gave Park "a new way to understand Taoist traditions as rich assets for maturing my Christian faith" (125), as did Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Graduate studies, research and field work provided opportunities for in-depth studies of Buddhism, Taoism and Korean shamanism. This last gave her "a sense of *Han*, angst, or deep wounded-ness of Koreans and a source of spiritual strength" (132). Park concludes the chapter with reflections on the experience and gift of spiritual friendship as well as different approaches to practicing multiple religious traditions, ending with a word of appreciation for "Merton's openness and genuine thirst for truth" (137).

In her brief "Epilogue" (139-42), Park expresses what writing this book meant to her: "For four-and-half years now, I have been examining Thomas Merton's life through his writings, and using it to reflect upon my own life. Although I had been reading him for years, the process of writing challenged me to find my authentic self as a postcolonial feminist scholar as well as an Asian religious woman residing in the United States" (139). At the end of this process, she professes: "I am ready to dance again with Merton" (142).

A few words of caution for readers are in order. First, access to this book is limited: the cost of this book in both printed and electronic formats is prohibitive and that is unfortunate. Second,

readers may be distracted, as I was, by typos, misspellings, inaccurate book titles and confusing wording. The book would have benefited from more careful proof-reading. Third, there are some factual inaccuracies. For example: Merton's father, Owen Merton, came from an Anglican family not a Catholic one (14); Merton met M. in 1966 not 1964 (20); she was not 19 at the time, but in her mid-20s (65); Merton stipulated that his journals not be published until 25 years after his death, but he did not request that volume 6 of the journal be published 35 years after his death (75).

What I like best about this book is that Park illustrates what an honest dialogue with a spiritual guide and companion might engender. Only a few might choose to document such a dialogue with Merton in a book. But many, myself included, would benefit from looking back and reflecting more deeply and intentionally on how our own spiritual journeys may have been illuminated by Merton. Sophia Park invites readers of Merton to do what she has done in this book: to identify and trace Merton's footprints in their own lives. Reading this intimate account of her spiritual journey may help us to recognize how we too have been and continue to be beneficiaries of Merton's life and writings.

Importantly, Sophia Park reminds us that each of us views Merton through the lens of personal experience and socio-cultural location. I am grateful for the ways in which she highlights how her own multi-faceted identity illuminates her reading of Merton's life and legacy. Park delivers what the title of the book promises: the story of *An Asian Woman's Religious Journey with Thomas Merton*. She does so with heartfelt passion!