

Sinking Roots and Branching Out

Review of

*Thomas Merton's Tree of Life:
The Growth of a Radical Ecologist*

by Donald P. St. John

e-book, 2022

293 pages / free download: pdf or epub

Reviewed by **Monica Weis, SSJ**

For Merton aficionados, this e-book covers much of Merton's thinking and writing from his early poetry in the 1940s to his 1963 response to Rachel Carson (see *Witness to Freedom* 70) and the land ethic of Aldo Leopold. A plethora of citations combine new quotations with well-known Merton passages that many readers can quote. While each of the three sections ["Sinking Roots"; "Branching Out/Soaking in Wisdom"; "The Voice of the Prophet"] concentrates on aspects of Merton's life and experience, the Preface (vi) is perhaps the book's most telling portion, in which St. John hits the ground running with his argument: the distinction between a millennial consciousness, i.e. "anthropocentric triumphalism," and an ecological consciousness whose "core principle is that we belong to a community of living beings" with responsibilities to and for each other (see Merton's February 16, 1968 letter to Barbara Hubbard: *Witness to Freedom* 74-75).

Part One: "Sinking Roots" (1-96) lays out the importance of two geographies in Merton's development – the influence of the actual landscape and the spiritual geography. Using the metaphor of a tree growing, St. John invites readers to immerse themselves in Merton's experience to discover "the light of dawn and the budding colors of Spring" as well as "the starkness of winter landscapes" (4), all of which give rise to an ecological personhood.

Part Two: "Branching Out, Soaking in Wisdom" (97-232) explores at length Merton's interest in and exposure to Zen, Chuang Tzu, Maximus the Confessor and Teilhard de Chardin, as well as Merton's desire for more solitude and his move to the hermitage. Changing the tree metaphor to music, St. John envisions the growth of Merton in his poetry – exemplified by "allegro," "largo," "andante" -- and in essays such as "Rain and the Rhinoceros" and *Day of a Stranger*. This long section includes an essay previously published (chapter 10 on Chuang Tzu) that could have benefitted from significant editing to re-focus it on the trajectory of the argument.

Readers will be eager – perhaps even anxious – to get to Part Three: "The Voice of a Prophet" (233-85) to learn what might be new about Merton as a radical ecologist – what might add to the

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already acknowledged work of Kathleen Deignan, Douglas Christie and Monica Weis (the first two not cited or mentioned at all). The opening of chapter 20, “Prophetic Ecology” (265), which is a quotation from the Preface to *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965), is perhaps most telling: Merton considers *Conjectures* a “a series of sketches and meditations, some poetic, and literary, others historical and even theological, fitted together in a spontaneous, informal philosophic scheme in such a way that they react upon each other” (v). Looking at this entire, well-researched text, readers might experience this e-book as a “series of sketches and meditations” by a widely-read author who can as easily discuss Carl Jung as the eco-poetics of Hwa Yol Jung and his distinction between “homopiety” and geopiety” (40).

Somewhat annoying are problems with formatting – sub-heads usually in bold but occasionally in italics (46, 48, 49, 51) and typos which feature the parable of “Cook Ding” as occasionally “Cook Ting” (138-40). Nevertheless, readers who can sustain viewing a long text on the computer – downloaded or on the screen – will be awash in Merton quotes from his poetry, journals, letters and published writings and will come away with a deeper, more expansive knowledge of Merton and his thinking.