

Introduction: Spirituality as the Freedom to Channel Eros

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Ronald Rolheiser's *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* offers a recent and refreshing attempt to define that slippery neologism in our American vocabulary during the past three decades. His Augustinian bent reverberates with Thomas Merton's: 'Spirituality is about what we do with the fire inside of us, about how we channel our eros'.¹ He prefaces this definition with the insight that spirituality ultimately concerns the desire of a restless heart, a desire manifest as either 'aching pain or delicious hope'. For that reason, Rolheiser insists that spirituality is not marginal or optional, nor is it to be identified with 'serenely picking or rationally choosing certain spiritual activities like going to church, prayer or meditating, reading spiritual books, or setting off on some explicit spiritual quest'. Even an unthematic spirituality (without any explicit religious dimension) shapes our actions because 'the fire that burns within us' makes us act, leading us to a greater integration or disintegration of our personality, mind, and body—and to the strengthening or disintegration of our relationship to God, others, and the cosmos. Rolheiser points to the threshold of John of the Cross's reflection upon the journey of the soul with its language of eros: 'One dark night, fired by love's urgent longing...'²

From the previously unpublished variant drafts of Thomas Merton's *The Sign of Jonas* in this volume of *The Merton Annual*, we hear an echo of this darkness and eros. Most readers are familiar with Jonas' flight from Nineveh and from his mission to proclaim God's inclusive

1. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 11.

2. *The Holy Longing*, pp. 6-7.

love and mercy; the whale carried the prophet back ironically to that very city. The ivy plant in the story is a less familiar symbol. It occurs later, growing over Jonas's head as he sat, giving him shade from the hot sun. This shade made Jonas complacent and so the ivy withered. Thomas Merton reflects:

The whale and the ivy in Jonas can be taken to represent the vicissitudes of the interior life, in which God sends us a darkness which we do not like... We learn to descend into the abyss for love of [the God Who died for us] (below, pp. 16-17).

What makes Merton's writing a religious classic is his power to name for contemporary readers the dynamics of this experience of darkness and desire.

If you recoiled upon hearing Rolheiser use the word 'eros' as a metaphor for spirituality, you are not alone. Part of our problem is anchored in American culture's tendency to define eros in a narrow sexual sense: the erotic as genitality. But as Sallie McFague (among other feminist theologians) alerted us 15 years ago, there are diverse models of God with distinctive *kinds of love* and specific *virtues*. Such revisionist theology reflects the shift from an exclusively monarchical model of God to models that redefine *power* in light of the Christian paradigm. Remarkable changes happen when we move from the model of independent individuals and hierarchic patterns to holistic models that express interdependence and transforming relationships. Seen in this light, eros retrieves the eclipsed model of God-as-Lover found already in John of the Cross and Thomas Merton among other mystics. This model of healing love means finding someone 'valuable' and 'being valued' oneself. God's activity in the world is 'salvific', or redefined in terms of making whole or uniting with what is attractive and valuable. Eros is a passionate (mutual) attraction to 'the valuable'—thus, God's desire to be united with the world and our desire for God.³

The unlikely trio of persons whom Rolheiser chooses to illustrate his point about spirituality and eros—Janis Joplin, Princess Diana, and Mother Theresa—will hold your curiosity captive as he unfolds his explanation. Mother Theresa is presented as an erotically driven woman—not in the Freudian sense, but a woman of dynamic energy, very disciplined, 'dedicated to God and the poor'. Rolheiser points to her universal acclaim as a saint. He uses Kierkegaard's definition of a saint—'someone who *can will the one thing*'—and offers her as the

3. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

epitome of 'someone who can, precisely, channel powerful eros in a creative, life-giving way'. The rock star Janis Joplin, on the other hand, died from a drug overdose at the age of 27. Rolheiser describes Joplin's spirituality as her giving herself over totally to artistic creativity, performances, drugs, booze, sex, and the fatal neglect of her health. Her passion became a pathological dissipation of energies. Rolheiser judges Princess Diana, who died within days of Mother Theresa, to be 'half Mother Theresa and half Janis Joplin'. One remembers Diana's passion for land mine safety and countless initiatives on behalf of the poor; her photogenic designer fashion persona presents a disturbing counterpoint. Her spirituality was a vexing mixture of integration and disintegration, both a commitment to the poor and to her reckless Mediterranean-vacations lifestyle.

After alertly measuring 'The Current Struggle in Christian Spirituality' (Chapter 2) Rolheiser rewards readers with a rich excursus on 'Christ as the Basis for Christian Spirituality' (Chapter 4), concluding with a brief gem of theological caution, 'The Difference Between a Christian and a Theist'. *The Holy Longing* might well be employed as a very serviceable primer for students seeking a context in which to place Thomas Merton's spirituality.

Thanks to the resourceful recommendation of Jonathan Montaldo, Director of the Thomas Merton Center, readers of this *Annual* enjoy the variant drafts of a manuscript of *The Sign of Jonas* discovered recently in the New Jersey apartment of Merton's then-editor Robert Giroux. You will find the poet-monk's familiar spiritual vocabulary throughout its pages: 'shadows'; 'illusion/illusory problem'; 'disguise'; the true self-false self struggle. I halted abruptly when reading here the original, less rhythmic rendition of his memorable metaphor, 'travelling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox'. (See for yourself!) What deserves scholarly attention is the naive way in which Merton idealizes his vocation in these drafts. In retrospect, this is not unrelated to the irony in his claim that he 'finally got rid of' the idea of leaving Gethsemani by the end of 1947. Merton's explicit ambivalence in this early draft of the 'Prologue' about the genre of a 'spiritual journal' resurrects the question I have raised about the univocal sense of the generic term 'journal' applied to the seven-volume transcription of those writings.⁴ We await serious studies to ascertain and identify the ways that Merton channels his unique eros as he dis-

4. 'Thomas Merton's Journals: A Matrix of Spirituality', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6.4 (Fall 1998), pp. 22-27; and 'A Mirror To Recognize the True Self', *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 7.1 (Spring 1999), pp. 19-24.

covers his voice anew and arrives at dramatic new stages that do not necessarily correspond to the arguably arbitrary construct that divides his published journals into the seven volumes.

The current volume of *The Merton Annual* does not pretend to organize around a single theme, nor can one be forced upon it. But each article does contribute directly to Rolheiser's discourse on spirituality and the channeling of eros. Julie Leininger Pycior breaks important new ground by reconstructing and interpreting Catherine De Hueck Doherty's role in the friendship of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. To most readers of his autobiography and journals, 'the Baroness' disappears after making a transforming impact on Merton in Harlem before he decides to enter the Abbey of Gethsemani. Pycior shares her extensive recent research in various archives and through interviews with important principle personalities involved in Merton's life at that time. The results of the pivotal role of Friendship House in Merton's life is a careful historical analysis that sets a new benchmark for Merton studies. And she reminds us how those who are preoccupied with Merton and 'the feminine' easily overlook these two extraordinary women who played key roles in his life and monastic vocation. Quoting Dorothy Day, Pycior identifies words that, no doubt, worked their way by osmosis into Merton's consciousness: 'women being practical and never too optimistic are the best ones to make these beginnings'. Both Day and Doherty inaugurated Merton in the Catholic Social Justice Movement of the late 1930s—as well as challenged him on the definition of 'saint'.

By coincidence, a pair of essays authored by Phillip Thompson and John Wu, Jr interpret Merton's revisionist reading of the deeper spiritual crises underlying our technological culture. Thompson analyzes Merton's contemplative critique in light of our alienation (manifest in massive boredom and metaphysical fatigue) from traditional religious resources. He contributes a careful reading of Merton's criteria for constructing a comprehensive religious ethic, an applied ethics of technology. John Wu, Jr, a well-recognized Merton scholar, addresses the blurring of the distinction between Science and Technology. The result is that pure science abdicates to applied science, and the utilitarianism and pragmatism become surrogate religions. Like Thompson, Wu points to Merton's reading of Jacques Ellul and Merton's intellectual balance that refused to condemn technology per se. Wu's great contribution in this essay is to relate Merton's moderation, or balance, with the Chinese 'Middle Way', the solitude of the desert that yields wisdom, and Thérèse of Lisieux's spirituality of 'the Little Way'. Into all this, he deftly weaves Merton's appreciation of

Ionesco's *The Rhinoceros* and the threat of totalitarianism disguised as freedom. Here readers will discover a fruitful channeling of Merton's creative energy. John Wu, Jr epitomizes the liberally educated Christian Humanist who faithfully interprets Merton for a new generation.

Roger Corless, no stranger to readers of *The Merton Annual*, rounds out our medley of regular essays by appraising Merton as an exemplar of interreligious dialogue. Corless's earlier analysis of Merton's recovery from the unreliable information he received from D.T. Suzuki remains a forceful revisionist interpretation that is a prerequisite for any intelligent reader of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*⁵ (a collection of essays structured around the monk's exchange of writings with Suzuki). He critiques the interreligious debate over exclusivism and inclusivism when addressing the salvation question. But more importantly, this essay carries us 'Beyond Merton's Legacy' and with specific recommendations for a new stage of Christian-Buddhist dialogue: a consciousness in which many absolutes co-inhere. Corless does not shy from critiques of Christian theology and spirituality, nor from cautions about lacunae in various lineages of Buddhism as he describes such a global spiritual consciousness. It is a dramatic and provocative example of spirituality freely channeling eros in an act of integration as Christianity learns from Buddhism.

Finally, a brief article memorializes the recent passing of Mahanambrata Brahmachari, the Hindu monk described so vividly in Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Francis X. Clooney, SJ offers a concise encyclopedic article that yields insights for future scholars and readers. I did not realize that Brahmachari was born on Christmas Day. What a fitting coincidence for the man who encouraged Thomas Merton to discover his own Christian tradition. And for Brahmachari's death to fall on the feast of the evangelist Luke, whose Gospel makes us mindful of the poor and of Jesus' constant sharing of table fellowship.

This year's interview is with Jane Marie Richardson, SL and reveals a person who knew Merton and shares with him a very kindred spirit. As the editor of *Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*,⁶ Jane Marie reflects upon her experiences at the December 1967 and May 1968 retreat for women religious with Thomas Merton. She interprets over a decade of friendship with Merton and the strong historical and spiritual connections between the Loretto motherhouse

5. New York: New Directions, 1968.

6. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992. Also available in paperback: Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1997.

and the nearby Abbey of Gethsemani. Jane Marie responds to questions about Merton and 'the feminine' with especially insightful responses.

The 1999 bibliographic survey is presented with careful insight and judicious measure by my co-editor, Victor A. Kramer. His astute observation about the relative paucity of scholarly articles on Merton is a concern I share. (I will return to this matter at the conclusion of this introduction.) As editor of this year's *Annual*, I selected the books for review and the reviewers. It is pleasure to welcome to our pages eight new reviewers as well as a reprise by Merton scholar Donald Grayston. Our reviewers are chosen for their expertise and competence, and this year's contributors also bring a wealth of life experiences to this task.

The selected papers from the June 1999 International Thomas Merton Society general meeting at St Jerome's University in Waterloo, Canada, sprawl beyond whatever focus might have been intended in that gathering's theme: 'Magnetic North, True North: Geography Beyond Boundaries'. In this volume we unofficially collaborate with the ITMS in the experiment of selecting papers submitted in the wake of its biannual meeting. It is not an entirely novel procedure. Previous volumes of *TMA* evidence the *Annual* serving as a clearing house for ITMS scholarship. It is an experiment to feature them here as a collection. With the exception of Mitch Finley's plenary paper, all ITMS authors whose papers were selected for publication were required to make significant revisions in their work. They represent both new and younger scholars who are vital voices for future Merton studies. The time limitation of twenty-minute segments for ITMS presentations encourages brevity in order to include two or three papers in each session. However, various expert readers who served as the jury for all *TMA* essays and collaborated with the editors to insure the integrity of scholarship and a high standard of writing recommended in every case that the essays needed significant revisions or development. The abbreviated essays originating from the ITMS general meeting remain a problematic issue that deserves ongoing scrutiny.

It is joy to welcome as our inaugural guest editor for this volume's selected ITMS papers Dorothy LeBeau, Assistant Professor of Theology and Dean of Lay Students at St Meinrad School of Theology. She brings great gifts to Merton scholarship with her recent doctoral dissertation on Merton under the mentorship of James Wiseman, OSB at The Catholic University of America. Our work together has been facilitated by the fact that St Meinrad Archabbey is only an hour's distance from Louisville. I applaud her as a delightful colleague and

masterful editor in her own right. We will be seeing much more of her scholarly studies of spirituality and of Thomas Merton.

With the advent of electronic publishing, should *The Merton Annual* consider a venture into the world of e-journals? The question is obvious for many reasons. Not the least being to expedite access to the contents of the *Annual*. There is currently a six-month delay between the time that the edited volume is presented to the publisher and the appearance of the published volume. Not least among the factors to be considered is the financial savings that could be handed on to subscribers or to those who purchase individual volumes. Access to the Internet increases weekly as the cost of computer equipment becomes more affordable. Public libraries in every community offer computer access (and training) to all citizens. More and more college and university libraries offer computer use to the non-traditional and continuing education students as well as alumni... If we are to reach high school and college students, our future audience, we will need to approach them using their medium—the Internet.

An electronic version of *The Merton Annual* would not preclude the subsequent appearance of a published paperback edition, especially for libraries, retreat houses, scholars, and personal libraries. Another issue to consider is whether the e-journal would be offered in 'read only' form, or if selected essays, reviews, etc. may be printed by individuals on their personal computer. This issue primarily involves copyright concerns but it also reflects the all-too-easy temptation to plagiarize and pirate others' work by downloading and cutting-and-pasting electronically transmitted material. As a college teacher, I can attest to a growing nervousness in the academy around this phenomenon.

A decade ago, when I spent a sabbatical semester as Visiting Professor at the University of St Michael's College in Toronto, I was surprised but pleased to discover that graduate students were already borrowing computer disks containing images of texts and illuminated manuscripts from The Mediaeval Institute. With CD-ROM technology, we are now closer to such possibilities at the Merton Center of Bellarmine College and even via the Internet. Such a seismic shift has been compared to Gutenberg's revolution. Most of us witnessed a minor revolution with the burgeoning paperback industry in the 1960s. Already NetLibrary is retrofitting 50 books a day to electronic form by scanning existing volumes and making them available for Internet users. Librarians at universities and colleges report that circulation of books is plummeting. In December of last year *The New York Times* reported that Simon & Schuster were formatting all new

books in digital form and preparing to digitize at least 4,000 of its 20,000 backlist titles. The nation's largest publisher, Random House, has embarked on a two-year project to digitize all books from its backlist of 20,000 titles. Octavo Corporation (www.octavo.com) of Oakland, California has launched a religious series to give digital treatment to ancient manuscripts. Zoning in on details magnified 324 per cent from Hans Holbein's *Pictures of the Old Testament* or the *Tory Book of Hours* is changing the scholarly enterprise. In this context, the next wave of Broadband technology will make even the Internet look obsolete.

It appears that the question is not 'if' but 'when' *The Merton Annual* will advance with the new technology. We cannot expect to replicate Stephen King's two-day sales phenomenon of half-a-million e-book copies. But it would be reasonable to triple or quadruple our readership base. Both the ITMS, the Merton Center at Bellarmine, and *The Merton Annual* have a mutual interest in collaboratively exploring this prospect.

Which brings me back to Victor A. Kramer's observation that little appears about Merton in esteemed journals of national or international reputation 'except by a few already recognized scholars'. He notes the preponderance of periodical and book references: 'yet little of this appreciative commentary has more than passing value'. The resulting 'parochial figure' of Merton disappoints. I could not agree more. When we launched the new series of *The Merton Annual* with volume 6 (1993), the intention was to place Merton's work in a wider body of scholarship. In fact, based upon a scholars' retreat sponsored and hosted by the Abbey of Gethsemani, we presented a wide spectrum of papers on spirituality and postmodernity (the very topic that my co-editor rightly applauds in Robert Webster's essay in *The Journal of Religion*).

In brief, I wonder if several significant currents impede the progress that I, along with Kramer, encourage. For one, there is a tendency in some Merton circles to idealize his writings and his persona. This even happens when commentators criticize him for his human failures but paradoxically proceed to exaggerate and promote his saintliness. (Here is the opposite side of the *ad hominem* argument, as one of our referees for this volume remarked about one submission.) Second, there is a great hesitation when it comes to saying something critical of Merton's work. Authors in *The Merton Annual* have dared to risk such critical assessment when warranted because Merton taught us that uncritical scholarship dishonors our human dignity as well as the dignity of God's creation. Or as another colleague points out, per-

haps we have picked up Merton's own occasional bad habit of uncritical enthusiasm. What grows clearer is the need for an interdisciplinary and multicultural interpretation of Merton's work and spirituality. There is no substitute for reading Merton, placing his writing in a critical context, and carrying the discourse into conversation with the dynamics of our own post-Mertonian world.

As these scholarly undertakings mature, we will discover new facets of the diamond. Meanwhile, just like *The New York Times*, we at *The Merton Annual* will offer our readers 'all the [scholarship] that's fit to print'.