

## Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton's Prophetic Vision

Edited by Angus Stuart

Thomas Merton Society  
of Great Britain and Ireland 2005  
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The published proceedings of the Fifth General Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland in 2004 compose a rich and challenging set of reflections on the crisis of living faith and faithful living in this world of war and terror. The title of the conference and of the book is drawn from Merton's Prayer for Peace composed to be read in the House of Representatives in 1962. The stark choice he delineates in his lengthy and unsparing prayer is the subject of the papers edited by Angus Stuart whose deft introduction neatly sets the context for the reflections to follow.

Diana Francis begins with an incisive analysis of "War, Peace and Faithfulness" in light of Jesus' teaching. In her work of deconstructing the myth of war in light of Jesus' vision of the kingdom of positive peace, she introduces a theme that will be echoed several times in the book: the linkage of war and masculinity founded on a dominatory model of power. Though never mentioning Merton, she offers a Quaker critique of the war-mind, appealing to Gandhi and Dr. King to argue for "faithfulness" to an alternative vision of reality built on the cultivation of hope as our true defense against fear.

Tina Beattie deepens the reflection in her piece, "Vision in Obscurity": Discerning Peace in Fearful Times", offering an analysis of our crisis through the para-

digim of motherhood as a profound blood relationship to life expressed in the symbolic counter-face of war: birthing as opposed to killing. Here the theme of violence and masculinity is more radically explored in her implicit and explicit critique of the dominant constructions of masculinity.

Fernando Beltran Llavador's rich essay wrestles with a fundamentally Mertonian theme in "Unbinding Prometheus: Thomas Merton and the 'Patient Architecture of Peace.'" Focusing on Merton's profound reflections on Promethean theology in *The New Man*, and *Raids on the Unspeakable* the author refreshes and updates the various pathologies which Merton diagnosed as consequence of humankind's essential self alienation and bondage to oppressive gods; but he goes one step further. Referencing a host of worthy interlocutors as Merton's conver-

sation partners in the project to unbind Prometheus, he underscores the challenge to bring Merton into dialogue with explicitly feminist concerns in attempting to elaborate the lineaments of a "patient architecture of peace." He ends by referencing the many advocates who have echoed Merton's call for a spiritual revolution for our age, committed to the patient, steady labor of constructing a global edifice of justice and peace, a new humanity recognizing in the unbinding of our Promethean selves, the truer Christ self.

The next two essays deal with Merton's radical critique of language as revelatory of our mind-states and productive of our world-states. Joseph Quinn Raab revisits Merton's habit of speaking truth to power with the spotlight on George W. Bush's religious language as it is used as a mandate for the "War on Terror". Raab dissects the messianic rhetoric of good

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versus evil that informs the global vision and agenda of the United States. With particular reference to the essay "War and the Crisis of Language", he draws on Merton's analysis of the language of power and its perpetuation of violence (a theme arising from the feminist concerns mentioned earlier).

David Joseph Belcastro works with the same essay as a way to perceive the pathologies of language in our time. Belcastro inverts the direction of the previous essay's analysis of political language by recovering the potency and insight of one of Merton's most troubling poems, *Chant to Be Used in Procession Around a Site with Furnaces*. Belcastro skillfully opens not just the poem but its background in the Beat Generation's attempt to awaken their contemporaries to the obscenity of war and the perversity of the world to which it gives rise. He helps us understand the structure of Merton's poem as an assemblage, a found-poem, whose language is actually drawn, as Merton notes, from the "very words of the commanders of Auschwitz. It would be impossible to invent something more terrifying than the truth itself."

Nigel Martin draws from his experience of peacemaking in the Northern Irish context in his essay "Beyond the Politics of Peacemaking: Retrieving the Mystery of Hospitality," focusing on Merton's capacity for conversation and friendship as skilful means to bring forward the "patient architecture of peace." Reviewing Merton's own "apostolate of friendship" with innumerable others across all cultural and religious boundaries, he makes a case for contemplative ecumenism that opens to dialogue of the heart and emphasises that the way of Je-

sus, and other patient architects of peace like Gandhi, King, Tutu, Vanier, Brother Roger and Merton himself, went beyond the politics of peacemaking to authentic, and ultimately transformative hospitality.

The Canadian writer Mary Frances Coady explores the strong impression that Jesuit Father and Holocaust martyr Alfred Delp had on Merton. Asked to write the introduction to his prison diary, Merton discovered a kindred spirit in this contemporary of Bonhoeffer and Rahner, one who shared his vision of a Church in dialogue and service to the secular order. Merton echoed Delp's wonderment at the Church's misunderstanding of its mission in the face of world crisis, but found in the young martyr's Advent reflections not desolation but hope that, as Merton said, "truth is hidden in the heart of untruth." Coady ends her reflection wondering what Delp and Merton have to say to the 21st century world balanced on the rim of chaos: freedom and service—indeed, service as freedom.

The next two essays relate to Merton's engagement with the Civil Rights movement in America in the 60s. Patrick O'Connell offers an extraordinary exegesis of four poems written between 1963 and 1968 which explored the political and spiritual significance of key moments of the movement for racial justice. His analysis of these poems is utterly comprehensive, offering not just his skillful rendering of Merton's poetic intentions and allusions, but also his intimate familiarity with Merton's journals for this period which provide the fuller context and provocation for each piece. Each poem is masterfully "unpacked" so the reader can appreciate with O'Connell's rich sensibility, Merton's staggering comprehension

of structural racism in America, the forces which keep it in play, and his vital engagement in the struggle to heal it by exposure and judgment.

Gerald Grudzen's essay, "Martin Luther King and Thomas Merton: Prophets of World Peace," parallels the prophetic development and maturation of these two American prophets, tracing the confluences in their thinking and the contributions each made to the social conscience of their moment. Noting the profound influence which Gandhi had on both men, Grudzen explores how each shared his vision of the public realm not as "secular" but as "sacred," and how both were united in a radical application of Christian morality to the problems of the modern world, challenging the separation of the moral and secular orders.

Larry Culliford's offering "The New Heroism—Faith and Courage: Vital Remedies against Terror and Fear," reiterates Merton's insistence that the only cure for the spiritual cancer of hatred is a spiritual cure, and he plays off a letter Merton wrote to the Catholic Worker and also an essay of Emerson's, "Heroism", which addresses the challenges posed by the *Bhagavad Gita*. Culliford puts Merton and Emerson in dialogue about the true nature of the hero as one who wrestles with the sources of evil not in the external arena, but internally in terms of constructive versus destructive thoughts, words and deeds. Culliford brings a therapist's insight and a Buddhist's skillfulness to the elaboration of the hero as one who is essentially free of the mental and emotional state of desire which is the generative ground of fear, anxiety, bewilderment, doubt, anger, shame, guilt and sadness.

The final essay in the book is "The Artist in a Time of Crisis: Thomas Merton's Artistic Response" by Paul Pearson. Noting Merton's evolution as a writer, Pearson specifies how his poetry migrated from the cloister, to the desert, to the woods, to the radical deconstruction of language in his anti-poetry described in earlier essays in this volume. With these transformations in mind, he notes how Merton's visual art follows a similar progression. The Columbia cartoonist who enjoyed drawing nudes, became, in his monastic life, more pious, turning his hand to strong but simple religious images. But as his relationship to the world eventually radicalized, so did his artistic expression, taking the form of calligraphy, graffiti, and later, photography. Merton's final development as an artist was behind the lens of a "Zen camera" which became for him a meditative medium that moved him from clear sight to insight, and which leave us the gift of the last forms of his contemplative fascination.

*Across the Rim of Chaos* is a powerful collection of essays that allows Merton's voice to still speak through the scholars who retrieve his wisdom and set it in dialogue with the crises of our time. Each in turn offers ample evidence that his legacy is ever relevant, and more than that: urgent, essential.

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