

draws the reader in. Perhaps we have to live with this contradiction as long as we are still human. It is Merton's gift to us that there are words to express something of that, words which constantly strive to reach beyond themselves and fall into the silence of God.

Helen Burn is Director of Studies for the West of England Ministerial Training Course, and teaches Church History and Doctrine.

**A Silent Action:
Engagements with Thomas Merton**

Rowan Williams

Fons Vitae

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In this short but beautifully produced little volume Rowan Williams, the 104th Archbishop of Canterbury, has brought together his various writings about Thomas Merton, pieces written over a number of years, as his engagement with Merton's life and thought has continued, evolved and matured.

Many readers of *The Merton Journal* will be familiar with some of these essays as a number have appeared in these pages or in proceedings of the Thomas Merton Society's conferences - indeed some readers may well recall hearing the lectures themselves. Having heard three of them delivered, and

subsequently having read them over the years as they were published, I still found in these pages a freshness, depth and eloquence rarely found in Merton studies.

The earliest essay in this collection, "'Bread in the Wilderness': The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov," was initially a paper Dr. Williams delivered in 1973 at a Cistercian conference held in Oxford that year, and published in a volume edited by Canon A.M. Allchin entitled *Theology and Prayer*. Subsequently it has also appeared in a number of other publications. However, as Rowan Williams admits in his foreword, this was by no means his first 'engagement' with Merton as he'd been reading and wrestling with him since his teens. This chapter, a study of the monastic theology of Merton and Evdokimov, was originally one of the earliest pieces to address Merton's interest in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, in particular the Russian émigrés writing in France. Merton's notebooks and journals from the fifties and sixties show how extensively he'd read their work. In this essay Williams stresses that at the heart of the monastic theology of both Merton and Evdokimov was their 'affirmation of oneself simply as a person, as a human being'. As Master of Novices at Gethsemani for ten years this concern of Merton's is clearly evident as he stresses that the novices need to be fully human before they can properly embrace the monastic

life. The novices needed a 'sophianic' worldview, as Williams writes: "The saint's vision of the world is God's vision of the world, because the saint is "transparent" to God: in the person of the saint contemplating God, God contemplates the world' (p.34) – words reminiscent of Merton's final conference to his novices in August 1965, before retiring to his Gethsemani hermitage, in which he had spoken of, 'living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time ... and that people are transparent, and the humanity of God is transparent in people' (from 'A Life Free from Care').

Although this is the earliest essay in the book the collection in fact begins with a much shorter essay. It is one Rowan Williams wrote for the journal *Cistercian Studies* for an issue they did in 1978, to commemorate Merton on the tenth anniversary of his death. This short essay is probably my favourite essay in the book – "A Person that Nobody Knows": A Paradoxical Tribute to Thomas Merton'. This essay points to the essential irony of the man – the talkative Trappist, the hermit of Times Square. As in the chapter on Merton and Evdokimov Williams suggests that 'the great Christian is the man or woman who can make me more interested in God than in him or her,' their transparency allows God to shine through, and Merton does this not letting 'me look at him for

long: he will, finally, persuade me to look in the direction he is looking' and making his reader 'concerned to find how I can turn further in the direction he is looking, in prayer, poetry, theology, and encounter with the experience of other faiths; in trust and love of God our savior' (p.19).

Chapter 3, "New Words for God": Contemplation and Religious Writing', was a paper originally given at the first meeting of the Thomas Merton Society to be held at Oaham School, in 1998, and originally included in the volume *Thomas Merton: Poet, Monk, Prophet*. In this essay Williams examines the 'theology of the poetic' first by suggesting everything that it is not. He then moves forward by drawing a comparison, pointing to the relationship between his 'non-definition' of poetry and a definition of contemplation where both are attuned to the pure act of God. He concludes by suggesting that it is at this point that poetry and contemplation touch the prophetic, giving rise to 'New Words for God', indeed 'the poet and/or contemplative' can themselves become 'a new word for God' (p.50).

The next essay in the volume embraces what initially appears to be a completely different aspect of Merton's thought, monasticism and the social vision, allowing the prophetic side of the monk's poetry and contemplation, referred to in the previous chapter, to come to the fore. Williams begins by noting

the change in Merton's attitude to the city from his pre-monastic journals, through his early years in the monastery, to the growing maturity of his voice in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and he explores three factors that he suggests played an important part in these developments – Merton's reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* which Merton is reading at the time that he is struggling with the relationship of the monastery to the world, and his own position in relation to that world, especially as he develops his 'social voice'. Another important discovery of this period were his readings in the work of orthodox theologians such as Oliver Clément, Sergii Bulgakov, and Paul Evdokimov who fed his understanding of 'the material world as sacramental' (p.64), and the Christian struggle, as Clément writes, 'to transform the earth into a sacrament, to transform culture into an icon of the heavenly Jerusalem' (p.62). Such a vision of the world makes speech possible, in the way outlined by Williams in the previous chapter. When speech becomes a casualty of the world in which we live then, Merton comes to understand, the monk or the poet may have to speak out. As Williams sees Merton's struggle here he points to what he sees as a final factor influencing Merton's development, his reading of both Bonhoeffer and Barth. Church pronouncements are not merely what Barth called 'the

dog in the nice room' but an understanding that even though humanity is 'totally under wrath' it is also 'totally taken to the far side of that wrath because it is absorbed in Jesus' (p.67). As Merton tentatively acquires a civic voice, Williams suggests that it is a voice formed by his reading of these influential writers.

The final chapter of *A Silent Action* goes on to explore in much greater depth Merton's reading and understanding of the work of Karl Barth that Williams has just touched upon in the preceding chapter. Barth was an important writer for Merton from the early nineteen sixties onwards and the opening chapter of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, entitled 'Barth's Dream' – which Merton for a time considered as a title for the whole book – sets the scene. The dream in question was one Barth had about the composer Mozart, a dream pointing beyond Barth's theology to a deeper wisdom, the wisdom of the divine child whom Barth heard speaking through Mozart's music. So Merton can address Barth saying, 'Your books (and mine) matter less than we might think: there is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation.' Williams then uses this as the launching pad from which to explore Merton's reading of Barth suggesting that it goes beneath the surface to a sophianic level, finding, especially in Barth's humour, an insight that 'the self before God is not serious, it is groundless' (p. 74) and suggesting that this ground-

lessness before God helped Merton in his inter-faith dialogue with Buddhists. Williams traces this line of development in Merton's thinking through a variety of journal entries pointing to an understanding of the self as nothing before God, a 'recognition that my reality rests "like a feather on the breath of God"' (p.75) and leading him to suggest that 'Merton is in revolt against the *seriousness* of the self-image,' (p.78) a theme readers of Merton are all too aware of in his work. Williams concludes by pointing to Merton's own ongoing struggle with the self, especially in relation to his 1966 affair with the young nurse from Louisville.

As the final essay in this collection concludes by referring to this affair so this volume itself closes with a poem written by Rowan Williams entitled 'Thomas Merton: Summer 1966,' a poem referring to that same tangled love affair. The essays in this volume are complimented by the addition of two other brief but astute pieces, a Preface by Jim Forest and an Afterword by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware of Diokleia.

Although physically this appears a slim volume, do not be deceived. The essays in *A Silent Action* are among some of the finest and most perceptive written about Merton's life and thought. They demand that the reader engage with Merton's thinking in a lively and thoughtful manner and in the light of the world in which we are living now.

Although the essays were originally written many years apart and for a variety of different conferences and anniversaries the themes they tackle are quintessential Merton, and they are as timeless and as applicable now as when they were penned.

Paul M. Pearson is Director and Archivist of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Kentucky.

The Wounded Heart of Thomas Merton

Robert Waldron
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£14.50

This is a book for Merton scholars seeking to explore and explain his deepest psychological motivation throughout life. Waldron has set himself an ambitious task, and is asking his readers to expend significant intellectual effort to follow him, as he proceeds unshakeably, like a bloodhound on the scent of his quarry: Merton's wounded heart.

His thesis is clearly set out in Chapter One: 'To understand the *man* Thomas Merton, we must begin with his relationship with his mother', who dies when he is six years old. Waldron has it that this loss meant thereafter, 'With his