

Book Reviews

The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton

Monica Weis, SSJ
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Those familiar with the previous work of Sr Monica Weis, SSJ, will not be surprised by the title and content of her most recent book. As indicated by the substantial bibliography of Weis's previous writing on the subject of Thomas Merton's environmental outlook, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* provides us with a single volume of introductory and exploratory material investigating the Trappist's

bourgeoning and later more-substantive engagement with subjects relating to the environment, creation and social justice.

Weis identifies what she sees as Merton's most significant liminal experience of awaking environmental consciousness with his reading of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and his correspondence with her about the book early in 1963. The importance of this exchange is described by Weis as follows: 'Indeed, Merton's reading of *Silent Spring* was an epiphanic event akin to other well-known and powerful moments of spiritual insight in his life' (p.10). The gravity and long-lasting influence of this particular moment in Merton's life remains a matter for scholarly de-

bate, but for Weis it is clear that Merton's 'environmental vision,' as such, is directly linked to Carson's text, which is why Weis opens her book with this episode.

The concepts of becoming awake and proceeding to focus one's vision provide the thematic thread that ties chapters two through five together. First introduced in the second chapter – with a title that summarizes its purpose, 'Learning to See: Becoming Awake' – 'awaking' as foundational element serves to provide the reader with an imaginative illustration of the process of gradual recognition of one's relationship with all of creation. As with Merton, we too are invited into seeing the world anew, recognizing God in creation and our mutual interdependency with the rest of the world.

According to Weis, it was Merton's parents that first cultivated the ability to 'see' the world, to become 'awake' to the reality around him that was indeed more than met the eye. Weis refers to this nascent experience of creation as seeds planted in the heart of the young Merton by his artistic and creative parents. These seeds, Weis contends, will eventually grow into the fruits of a new environmental consciousness in the 1960s.

A fair amount of this book consists of brief presentations of various written entries and personal experiences that highlight Merton's burgeoning environmental consciousness, while correlating com-

plementary and contextualizing experiences along the way. It is an interesting read in that Weis provides us a swath of material ranging from Merton's poems and journals to his most popular books. The final chapter offers a presentation on the zenith of Merton's environmental consciousness, during which, in the middle and late 1960s, the Trappist monk appears to more readily draw connections between his concern for and relationship with creation and the timely issues of social justice in the world. In many ways, Weis notes, Merton presages the work of contemporary authors in the decades since his early death in 1968.

I would be remiss if I did not note one disappointment with this text. While early on Weis makes mention of Merton's consideration of becoming a Franciscan friar and the fact that this reality never came to fruition, that amounts to the full extent, fleeting at best, to which the Franciscan tradition is treated in studying Merton's environmental vision.

However, that lacuna is, in this author's opinion, a significant one, if indeed not an uncommon phenomenon in Merton scholarship. While the young Merton did initially desire to become a Franciscan friar and ultimately did not, he did enter the Third Order or 'Secular Franciscan' Order during his tenure teaching at St Bonaventure University. Additionally, beginning with his university coursework under

Dan Walsh, continuing through his time as an English professor in Olean and well into his time as a monk, Merton read, discussed, lectured and wrote about St Francis, the Franciscan intellectual tradition and major figures from that tradition – most notably St Bonaventure and John Duns Scotus. Additionally, Merton's early journal entries about nature often seem to echo Francis's own *Canticle of the Creatures*, such as in his reflection on page 292 of *Sign of Jonas*.

There are frequent references throughout Weis's book to an Incarnational and Sacramental spirituality of creation without much examination of such an outlook's origin, which is in part likely Merton's reading of Bonaventure and Scotus. One example of a uniquely Bonaventuran influence is Merton's regular description of creation reflecting, mirroring or revealing God, stemming from God's overflowing love.

Another Franciscan-source example is the several references to 'thisness' or *haecceity*, which is in fact the original principle of individuation developed by Scotus. Weis is correct to identify this concept with Gerard Manley Hopkins, for the Jesuit poet – admittedly in his own correspondence and other writing – was deeply influenced by and passionate about the work of Scotus. Hopkins's notion of 'inshape' itself came from Scotus's principle of individuation. Referencing the work of Robert Waldron,

Weis does briefly acknowledge the connection between Scotus and *haecceity* (p.27), but the explicit influence of Scotus on Merton's environmental and theological worldview goes unexamined.

While many of Merton's formative influences vis-à-vis his life-long environmental 'awakening' are presented in this volume, other major factors such as the Franciscan theological and spiritual thread still remain largely in need of further exploration. All in all, this book is a very welcome addition to the Merton library. Aware though Merton scholars and enthusiasts may have been about Merton's interest in the environment from both a spiritual and a socially critical perspective, few have taken on the formidable task of studying the development of such thought. For this reason, among others, Monica Weis deserves the accolades that come with making a meaningful contribution to the body of Merton scholarship. This book will be a helpful resource for many.

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