

## Thomas Merton: American Monk, Artist and Social Critic

by David Joseph Belcastro

### Introduction

From the outset, controversy has been characteristic of inquiries into the life and work of Thomas Merton. The title of an article in a 1953 edition of *Atlantic Monthly* by Aelred Graham, a fellow Benedictine, reflects something of Merton's reception by the Catholic community.<sup>1</sup> "Thomas Merton: a Modern Man in Reverse" was the first full-length appraisal of Merton. Graham's opinion of Merton as a young monk advocating medieval mysticism for laypersons turned out to be only partially correct. Merton would eventually be recognized as a monk moving in multiple directions with multiple tasks occupying his time and attention. As his vocation in the monastery unfolded, Merton's personal life and voluminous publications revealed trajectories that would eventually raise in the minds of many an enduring question: If he is a monk, what kind of a monk is he?<sup>2</sup>

Initial biographies indicate how this question engaged and shaped studies of Merton. As scholars turned their attention to Merton, it became apparent that no one perspective would be sufficient. In order to express the many dimensions of this monk, a Braque or Picasso would be needed to create an image of Merton ascending the seven mountains. Absent these cubists, we have come to rely on the convergence of various perspectives articulated in seemingly endless publications. For example, the authorized biography by Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*<sup>3</sup> published in 1984, gathered and integrated all the available information into a monumental biography but was unable to reveal the heart and soul of a man. Five years later David Cooper's *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial; The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*<sup>4</sup> focused on an important aspect of Merton but came to a conclusion that overemphasized Merton's humanism and failed to adequately represent the significance of Merton's commitment to religious life. By 1992 William Shannon would publish *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*<sup>5</sup> and in 1999 Lawrence Cunningham would publish *Thomas Merton & Monastic Vision*<sup>6</sup> in an effort to correct and balance previous inquiries with in-depth considerations of Merton's life and writings. Yet, even with these publications, the question of Merton's monastic vocation has remained on the table.

Because of the complex nature of his life, Merton's vocation unfolded in unexpected and, for some, unappreciated ways. Merton was aware of this and eventually resolved the question not with a clear answer but rather with an unambiguous commitment. On the 31st of January 1964, he wrote in his journal:

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<sup>1</sup> Aelred Graham, O.S.B., "Thomas Merton: A Modern Man in Reverse," *Atlantic* 191.1 (January 1953): 70-74.

<sup>2</sup> At a meeting of Italian monks in 1958, Dom Benedetto Calalti raised serious questions regarding Merton's vocation as a monk. See *Survival or Prophecy? The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 126 and 142-3.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> David Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial; the Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (Athens and Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> William Shannon, *Silent Lamp; the Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroads, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision* (Grand Rapids Michigan and Cambridge, UK: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999).

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The new *Monastic Studies* is out, only one copy in the house, in the Chapter Room. A long review takes in that Italian collection of monastic conferences in which Dom [Benedetto] Calati discusses me as — precisely what? As utterly out of his world. And, of course he is right. I do not belong to his monastic world at all, am no part of it — the world where the status quo is just all right. On the other hand I do not rebel against it either. I am just not concerned with it. And thus from many points of view I am not a monk. In general that is all right with me, since I need only to be concerned with loyalty to my own graces and my own task in life, and not with being recognized by them in their categories.<sup>7</sup>

What is beyond question is that Merton became a monk who engaged the imagination of his and subsequent generations to think deeply about religion in a secular age. It is important to note that he did this in *conversation*, directly and indirectly, with Dorothy Day, Abraham Heschel, Eric Fromm, Abdul Aziz, Ernesto Cardenal, Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, Walker Percy and countless others. His extensive correspondence<sup>8</sup> and collection of literary essays<sup>9</sup> are artifacts of conversations that were essential to his monastic formation.<sup>10</sup> Merton's conversations underscore the multiple and often times contradictory dimensions of his monastic life. Here was a monk cloistered within a community of silence and solitude, and yet also a public intellectual speaking out on current issues and events. He became, as noted by Anne E. Carr, the "most influential and widely read American religious thinker of our time."<sup>11</sup>

The correspondence between Merton and Czeslaw Milosz is a fine example of a friendship and conversation that flourished. Their correspondence has been long recognized as one of the most significant in the Merton corpus. After reading Milosz's *Captive Mind*, Merton initiated an exchange of letters that addressed a common concern for the modern world and shared thoughts on one another's books. Eventually Milosz became aware of what he believed to be at the heart of Merton's work. Following his reading of Merton's second journal book, *The Sign of Jonas*, Milosz writes:

I waited for some answers to many theological questions but answers not abstract as in a theological treatise, just on the border between the intellect and our imagination, a border so rarely explored today in religious thinking: we lack an image of the world, ordered by religion, while Middle Ages had such an image. This was not the aim of your diary and I have no reason to demand from one book of yours what can be demanded from all your work. But a reader (I can judge by introspection only) is eager to learn (gradually) what is the image of the world in Thomas Merton. In a period when the image accepted by the majority is clear: empty Sky, no pity, stone wasteland, life ended by death. I imagine a reader who says: he possessed a secret, he succeed in solving the puzzle, his world is harmonious, yet in his diary he tells already about sequences while we would be ready to follow him in 5 volumes through a very vision of the world redeemed by Christ.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Robert Daggy, ed., *Dancing in the Water of Life; the Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Five 1963-1965* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997), 68.

<sup>8</sup> There are over 20,000 letters to over 2,100 correspondents in the archive at the Thomas Merton Center of Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. Selected letters were published between 1985 and 1994 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in five volumes: *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon; *The Road to Joy*, ed. Robert Daggy; *The School of Charity*, ed. Patrick Hart; *The Courage for Truth*, ed. Christine M. Bochen; and *Witness to Freedom*, ed. William H. Shannon. In 2008, Harper Collins published a one volume edition entitled *Thomas Merton; A Life in Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen. These publications only include Merton's letters. Throughout the years both sides of a correspondence have been and continue to be published, for example the letters between Merton and Milosz and those between Merton and Leclercq noted in this essay.

<sup>9</sup> Brother Patrick Hart, ed., *Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> Ross Labrie's *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1997), and Paul Elie's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage: Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor, Dorothy Day and Walker Percy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), provide excellent studies of the importance of Merton's engagement with Catholic writers in America. Malgorzata Poks' *Thomas Merton and Latin America: a Consonance of Voices* (Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011) examines his relations with Latin American poets.

<sup>11</sup> Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 146.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Faggen, ed., *Striving Towards Being: the Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 61-62.

Their correspondence reflects, albeit in a slanted way, an effort to clarify this vision of the world redeemed in Christ. Merton's eagerness to join with Milosz, Albert Camus, Arthur Koestler and others in a revolt against the nihilism of the twentieth century is apparent from the outset.<sup>13</sup> For Merton, however, that revolt was grounded in Christ. In a letter dated the 28th of February 1959, Merton writes:

Milosz — life is on our side. The silence and the Cross of which we know are forces that cannot be defeated. In silence and suffering, in the heartbreaking effort to be honest in the midst of dishonesty (most of all our *own* dishonesty), in all these is victory. It is Christ in us who drives us through darkness to a light of which we have no conception and which can only be found by passing through apparent despair. Everything has to be tested. All relations have to be tried. All loyalties have to pass through fire. Much has to be lost. Much in us has to be killed, even much that is best in us. But Victory is certain. The Resurrection is the only light, and with that light there is no error.<sup>14</sup>

With the publications of Roger Lipsey's *Angelic Mistakes; the Art of Thomas Merton*,<sup>15</sup> Monica Weis' *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*,<sup>16</sup> and Christopher Pramuk's *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*,<sup>17</sup> we are presented with seminal studies that address the question raised by Aelred Graham. Each sheds new light on Merton's monastic vocation as a visionary of the modern world redeemed in Christ. Lipsey draws our attention to Merton's inquiry into the contemplative dimension of the human experience via his drawing and calligraphy. Weis shows how Merton's contemplative vision of nature reveals God drawing humanity into a collaborative endeavor to restore a paradise that has become obscured and threatened by commercial pursuits of wealth and power. Pramuk reveals the source of Merton's contemplative vision of the world rooted in a Christology enriched by his inquiry into other traditions that expanded his inclusive vision for a fragmented and conflicted world.

In examining these three works, this essay will place them in their bibliographic contexts. With this in mind, biographical background will be provided with reference to Merton's work as an artist, environmentalist, and monastic theologian.

## Artist

The opening paragraph of Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, describes the world in which his pilgrimage would take place.

On the last day of January 1915, under the sign of the Water Bearer, in a year of a great war, and down in the shadow of some French mountain on the borders of Spain, I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him, born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers.<sup>18</sup>

It would be in this world, a world in which death, fear, and hatred are ever present, that Merton would set out on a path that would eventually bring him to the Abbey of Gethsemani hidden away in the knobs of Kentucky. Within those walls, his journey would continue ever deeper into the world of the twentieth century. The despairing image of his age so aptly described here became the impetus of a lifelong search for something hidden within the human experience.

<sup>13</sup> Faggen, 4; letter to Milosz dated the 6th of December 1958.

<sup>14</sup> Faggen, 19-20.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes* (Boston, Massachusetts: New Seeds Books, 2006). Roger Lipsey earned a Ph.D. in the history of art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. He is director of the parent company that publishes the journal *Parabola*.

<sup>16</sup> Monica Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011). Monica Weis, Ph.D., is a Sister of St. Joseph and a professor of English and director of the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia; the Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009). Christopher Pramuk, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 3.

Merton understood that both the awareness of his age and the longing for a hidden wholeness were a legacy left to him by his parents.

My father and mother were captives in that world, knowing they did not belong with it or in it, and yet unable to get away from it. They were in the world and not of it — not because they were saints, but in a different way: because they were artists. The integrity of an artist lifts a man above the level of the world without delivering him from it. . . . I inherited from my father his way of looking at things and some of his integrity and from my mother some of her dissatisfaction with the mess that the world is in, and some of her versatility. From both I got capacities for work and vision and enjoyment and expression. . . .<sup>19</sup>

Merton was indebted to his father for a vision of the world that “was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure . . . without decoration or superfluous comment.” He remembers his father as a “religious man (who) respect(ed) the power of God’s creation to bear witness for itself.”<sup>20</sup> As we shall see, what Merton remembers of his father and his father’s paintings would hold true for his own work as an artist-monk whose primary concern was to reveal the sublime grandeur of a hidden Presence to an age that lacked and sorely needed a new vision of the world for the years that lie ahead.

Merton’s life and work can be understood as emerging out of the tension between these two visions of the world. Throughout the years, Merton’s literary works have attracted the attention of scholars who observed in his letters, journals, essays, poetry, and photography the mind of an artist exploring, discovering and expressing in those works a new vision of the world that emerges from the convergence of the two.<sup>21</sup> *A Hidden Wholeness / The Visual World of Thomas Merton*, published two years after his death, brought to the public’s attention the collaborative work of Merton and his friend, John Howard Griffin. In the prologue, Griffin explains:

Thomas Merton’s art is grounded in this belief that at profound, often imperceived levels “everything connects” — even apparent opposites. He was affronted by what was popularly termed “religious art,” or at least by an art manacled to religious externals in such a manner that it cannot be free and true to itself. An art, on the contrary, that penetrated some of the mystery that is internal to reality elicited a deep response from him.<sup>22</sup>

The groundbreaking work of Roger Lipsey opens a deeper inquiry into Merton’s search for a hidden wholeness where “everything connects — even apparent opposites.” Lipsey’s earlier work, *The Spiritual in Twentieth Century Art*, prepared the way for *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*. Lipsey notes at the outset Merton’s indebtedness to Wassily Kandinsky, father of abstract art. Kandinsky’s book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1911, explored the possibilities of a new art that would give expression to “two universes in one — the visible universe of matter, space, and time, and an invisible universe of spiritual energies.” Lipsey’s interest, like that of Kandinsky’s, extends beyond the world of art to the loss of deeper dimensions of life in the modern world that had become “dominated by science and material progress, distorted by world wars and totalitarian regimes, and unsure of its metaphysics. . . .”<sup>23</sup>

Merton’s search for a hidden wholeness resonated with Lipsey’s thoughts on art and spirituality. He recognizes in Merton a person who shared his view of and concern for the world albeit from a different vantage point than that of an artist’s studio. There is a close affinity between Lipsey’s artist in search for the deeper dimensions of life and Merton’s vocation as

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<sup>19</sup> *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 3-4.

<sup>20</sup> *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> The following publications represent inquiries into Merton as an artist: Victor Kramer, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cisterican Publications, 1987); Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Texas: Texas Christian Press, 1979); Marie Theresa Coombs, *Mystery Hidden yet Revealed: a Study of the Interrelationship of Transcendence, Self-actualization and Creative Expression, with Reference to the Lives and the Works of Thomas Merton and Georgia O’Keeffe* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003); Debra Prasad Patnak, ed., *Geography of Holiness: The Photography of Thomas Merton* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1980).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Merton and John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness / The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Georgia: Norman S. Berg, 1977), 3.

<sup>23</sup> Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, 3.

a monk striving to look beyond and within, surrendering himself to God, and thereby allowing all preconceived notions to be undone in order to catch a glimpse of a deeper and more profound vision of life. Note Lipsey's description of the artist-monk:

Traveling those paths with difficulty, the traveler, now a pilgrim, is changed. The spiritual is not an abstract knowledge of cosmos or human nature; it is a renewed discovery, a beginning again and again. The pilgrim gains new eyes, a new feeling for things, a new sense of life, and this newness within cannot help but brighten the world at large and reveal its exquisite order. Then the new way of being fades or abruptly vanishes, together with all that it naturally reveals. The pilgrim is left wondering. However grand all that was, it lasted only a short while and cost a great deal. Is there any reason to go on? Who but a fool would collect *moments* of vision and coherent being, when one obviously needs permanence?<sup>24</sup>

For Lipsey, Merton was a pilgrim-monk, albeit with a vow of stability, whose entire life was a search for God. He was a Fool-for-Christ sustained in his holy quest by brief visions of the One he loved.

*Angelic Mistakes* focuses on the thirty-four works from nine hundred of Merton's original drawings and calligraphies in the archive at the Thomas Merton Center. Lipsey realized that the collection offered another chapter on the spiritual dimension of twentieth-century art while also providing insight into Merton's lifelong journey.<sup>25</sup> The book is exceptionally well organized, beginning with a foreword by Paul Pearson<sup>26</sup> that provides the biographical background to Merton's interest in art. This brief historical overview focuses on three periods: pen and ink illustrations for novels written during his school days at the Lycee Ingres in Montauban, in 1926; cartoons published in the *Columbia Jester* during his college days at Columbia in the mid-to late-1930s; and the drawings from his hermitage in the 1960s. Lipsey's excellent essay entitled "The Invisible Art of a Highly Visible Man" follows. He traces in greater detail the three periods of Merton's art. His account does not include the illustrations but rather focuses on the college cartoons, early monastic sketches of the Virgin and St. John of the Cross, and the drawing that Merton began in the fall of 1960. Most valuable is Lipsey's tracing out of influences reflected in the drawings that range from Ulfert Wilke in Louisville to Ad Reinhardt in New York to Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin in Russia to Tao calligraphers and the Zen master D.T. Suzuki. With regard to Merton's materials and methods, Lipsey offers here and in the appendix an interesting investigation into Merton's hermitage-studio by three professors from the art department at the University of Louisville who worked with him to uncover Merton's process of printmaking.

While all of this information is interesting and helpful, it is when Lipsey turns to the task of interpreting Merton's art that the reading becomes most intriguing. In a brief preface to the drawings, Lipsey explains that the presentation of the drawings in this volume is similar to the layout developed by Merton in *Monks Pond*, a magazine he published from Gethsemani, wherein drawings were juxtaposed with short texts. On the one hand, we are told that the text that has been selected for each of the drawings reflects interior experiences and thoughts that characterized Merton's life in the 1960s. On the other hand, we are warned not to read the texts as "captions" or view the drawings as "illustrations." The drawings are presented on one page and the texts on the opposite. For example, image number five on page 71 resembles an *enso*, that is to say, a prevalent image in Zen art that represents a circle of enlightenment. The brush stroke is bold. The ink is dark. The circle is dynamic. On the facing page, page 70, Lipsey provides a title, *Not a shadow but a sign*, and two quotes, the first quote from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and the second from "Answers from Art and Freedom" in *Raid on the Unspeakable*:

The nineteenth-century European and American realists were so realistic that their pictures were totally unlike what they were supposed to represent. And the first thing wrong with them was, of course, precisely that they were pictures. In any case, nothing resembles reality less than the photograph. Nothing resembles substances less than its shadow. To convey the meaning of something substantial you have to use not a shadow but a sign,

<sup>24</sup> Lipsey, *The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*, 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Paul M. Pearson is Director and Archivist of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky.



not the imitation but the image. The image is a new and different reality, and of course it does not convey an impression of some object, but the mind of the subject: and that is something else again.

True artistic freedom can never be a matter of sheer willfulness, or arbitrary posturing. It is the outcome of authentic possibilities, understood and accepted in their own terms, not the refusal of the concrete in favor of the purely “interior.” In the last analysis, the only valid witness to the artist’s creative freedom is his work itself. The artist builds his freedom and forms his own artistic conscience, by the work of his hands. Only when the work is finished can he tell whether or not it was done “freely.”

Both the drawing and the two quotes offer “markings” of Merton’s journey and formation.<sup>27</sup> The references to “a new and different reality” and “the mind of the subject” direct us to what lies *within* Merton and specifically to his “creative freedom” as an artist-monk. The “new and different reality” is not created by the artist but rather *witnessed* by the artist as “spontaneous forms from nowhere.”

We now turn to “Signatures: Notes on the Author’s Drawings” that Lipsey places in the book just before the thirty-four drawings. It was originally published in *Raids on the Unspeakable* in 1966. Previous to this publication, the essay was presented as gallery notes for the exhibition of selected drawings. Merton begins by saying what the drawings are not. They are not works of art or polemics against art. The viewer is not to look for traces of irony. Nor will s/he recognize familiar categories or be able to say this is a drawing of this or that. More importantly, he goes on to say what the drawings are. They are described as “signs without prearrangement, figures of reconciliation, notes of harmony, inventions perhaps, but not in the sense of ‘findings’ arrived at by the contrived agreement of idea and execution.” While he appears to be clarifying the nature and purpose of these “abstractions,” he eventually moves away from a specific definition and eventually decides “one might call them *graffiti* rather than calligraphies” that summon the viewer to “awareness, but not to ‘awareness of.’”<sup>28</sup>

Why does Merton choose to describe his drawings as *graffiti*? While he makes reference to other definitions, saying it may be like this or that, terms familiar to us from various artistic traditions, he chooses *graffiti*. It is a far more public genre than abstract paintings displayed in museums or calligraphies shelved in libraries and monasteries. Graffiti are public statements spontaneously scribbled *outside* in the open on the sides of trains, bridges, and vacant buildings. It is important to point out that these drawings even exist outside the church. As Lipsey points out, they were conceived and presented “at a certain inner distance from the church . . . and settled, instead, in an ecumenical, cross-cultural terrain where it awaited its audience.”<sup>29</sup> As monk-artist, Merton situates himself outside all institutions, on the border between those institutions and a larger and all-encompassing Reality that he directly grasped as the source of life and creativity. For this reason, Merton refers to the drawings as extending “beyond language.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, he wants us to see the drawings as “signatures of someone not around” who lives “in the desert”<sup>31</sup> “collaborating with solitude,”<sup>32</sup> contracting with the movement of Life, and witnessing to the One who is hidden yet present.<sup>33</sup>

While *Angelic Mistakes* opens another and important perspective on Merton’s vocation as a monk, does it provide any insight into his monastic vocation and vision of the world redeemed in Christ? The simple answer is *yes* provided we

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<sup>27</sup> Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, 59.

<sup>28</sup> Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, 8-9.

<sup>30</sup> Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, 50, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, 39, 41.

<sup>32</sup> Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes*, 42. Regarding Merton’s relationship to his potential audience, Lipsey writes, “Merton surrounded his visual art with as many walls, trip wires, and rabbit traps as he could think of to keep interpreters away. The images are not ‘drawings of,’ he said. They are ‘summonses to awareness’ but ‘not to awareness of.’ In case we still miss the point, he insisted that ‘their “meaning” is not to be sought on the level of convention or of concept’ and ‘there is no need to categorize these marks.’ They are ‘signatures of someone who is not around.’” In other words, no interpretation is appropriate and no artist is available for discussion. This is the situation as we approach the engaging task of interpreting his art. We are unwelcome.” *Angelic Mistakes*, 43.

clarify what we mean. He does not provide a vision but rather invokes the vision with seemingly “innocent” graffiti that sabotage our carefully constructed worldviews to catch a glimpse of a Presence, hidden yet at work, creating, sustaining, and redeeming Life. So, what kind of monk was Merton? It is becoming increasingly clear that he was an artist-monk who, like many artists before him, was driven by a vision beyond his immediate grasp but nonetheless captive of his heart.

## Social Critic

This “glimpsing” was not confined to the monastic enclosure. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton provides an account of an experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky. This is recognized as a turning point in his life that would significantly refocus his writings on prayer and contemplation to include war and peace, race and justice, and other social issues facing humankind in the coming decades.

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life: but the conception of “separate from the world” that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudo-angels, “spiritual men,” men of interior life, what have you.<sup>34</sup>

No longer seeing himself separate from the world, Merton not only entered the world but brought with him the unique vantage point of a monk with a prophetic outlook. It has often been noticed that Merton anticipated in his writings many of the challenges presently facing the Church and in the world with surprising insight.<sup>35</sup> This is particularly true with regard to the present environmental crisis. From the distant vantage point of knobs of Kentucky, he was able to observe the environmental problem that was looming over the horizon.

In “Rain and the Rhinoceros” Merton describes a rainy day in the hermitage. This account is important for it shows how his daily life and his experience of nature intersect to reveal an awareness of the natural world that he knew to be missing for his contemporaries.

Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By “they” I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something *actual* is to place it on the market. The time will come when they will sell you even your rain. At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness.

The rain I am in is not like the rain of cities. It fills the woods with an immense and confused sound. It covers the flat roof of the cabin and its porch with inconsistent and controlled rhythms. And I listen, because it reminds me again and again that the whole world runs by rhythms I have not yet learned to recognize, rhythms that are not those of the engineer.

I came up here from the monastery last night, sloshing through the cornfield, said Vespers, and put some oatmeal on the Coleman stove for supper. It boiled over while I was listening to the rain and toasting a piece of bread at the log fire. The night became very dark. The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 140-1.

<sup>35</sup> Over the years there have been important works on Merton as social critic: Robert Incausti’s *Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998); James Thomas Baker’s *Thomas Merton Social Critic* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009); and Robert Nugent’s *Silence Speaks: Teilhard de Chardin, Yves Congar, John Courtney Murray and Thomas Merton* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2011).

the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside! What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished by the wonderful unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everyone in the hollows!<sup>36</sup>

By invoking in the title a reference to Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, Merton compares the "they" in his essay with the characters in the theatrical production who lose their humanity by running blindly with the herd. For Merton, blindness was not the only problem underlying the social issues of the twentieth century. Without the interior silence to which Merton witnesses here, the voice of nature goes unheard. Blind and deaf, we strip hillsides, pollute streams, and destroy natural habitats. This spiritual disability presents another and equally devastating effect. We will no longer hear or catch glimpses of "a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor." For Merton the outer world and the interior life are not separate and unrelated. On the contrary, nature and humanity share an intimate relationship. This blending of inner and outer geography is reflected in his art, writings and, most importantly, his life. The integrating of geographies played a significant role in the unfolding transformation of Merton's consciousness, spirituality, and vision.<sup>37</sup>

Weis's study of Merton's concern for the environment first found expression in a 2005 publication entitled *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani; Landscape of Paradise*.<sup>38</sup> In 2011, she would publish a more comprehensive study with *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*. Focusing on the connection between Merton's spirituality and his emerging ecological consciousness, this publication brings to our attention the necessity to "see" the world in a direct and immediate manner that is characteristic of contemplatives and poets. With regard to the connection between Merton's spirituality as a Cistercian monk and his concern for the environment, Fr. James Conner in the foreword to this book writes:

"*Caeli enarrant gloriam Dei*": "The heavens proclaim the glory of God; and the firmament shows forth His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Thomas Merton chanted these words from the psalms almost every week for the twenty-seven years of his monastic life. These, along with many other expressions found in the psalms, served to deepen Merton's awareness of creation as a manifestation of God in the world.<sup>39</sup>

Conner draws to our attention the way in which technology is one of the main obstacles to contemplation and the ability to see the world clearly, beyond abstractions and illusions — abstractions and illusions that result in the degradation of the natural world:

Merton shows that it will be impossible to take part in this dance (of creation) so long as we view creation and other people simply as objects; doing so removes the seer from direct contact with the reality he or she sees. Merton illustrates this by contrasting the way a child views a tree — a vision "which utterly simple, uncolored by prejudice, and 'new'" — with the lumberman's vision "entirely conditioned by profit motives and considerations of business." He says that "this *exaggeration* of the subject-object relationship by material interest and technical speculation is one of the main obstacles to contemplation."<sup>40</sup>

While both points made by Conner clearly articulate the relationship between the way in which the contemplative life opens the eyes to a clear and direct vision of the world and nature in its own right, the second paragraph underscores the challenge presented by the technological age to seeing life in a deeper and more authentic way, and this is the problem that *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* addresses. As a consequence, the book not only offers a major contribution to Merton studies but to environmental studies that seek to understand and address a social problem that threatens the future of our planet.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Merton, "Rain and the Rhinoceros" in *Raid on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 9.

<sup>37</sup> Weis, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*, 97-98.

<sup>38</sup> Harry L. Hinkle, Jonathan Montaldo and Monica Weis, *Thomas Merton's Gethsemani; Landscape of Paradise* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2005).

<sup>39</sup> Weis, *The Environmental Vision*, ix.

<sup>40</sup> Weis, *The Environmental Vision*, ix.



Weis focuses on “touchstone” moments in Merton’s life. These brief moments in time are recognized as transformative “flashes of vision” and “spurts of spiritual growth” for Merton.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, each moment contributed to Merton’s formation as a monk and opened for him a vision of a hidden wholeness. We will only touch on two.

The first chapter is entitled “Encountering Rachel Carson; Environmentalist and Provocateur.” In 1963, Merton read Carson’s *Silent Spring*. Soon afterwards he wrote Carson a letter. Weis sees this encounter as an “epiphanic event” in Merton’s life. Merton’s letter reveals his appreciation for Carson’s timely book, his concern for “*both* birds and people,” and his belief that the environmental crisis was part of a much larger problem. Merton writes:

We dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself. The same mental processing, I almost said mental illness, seems to be at work in both cases, and your book makes it clear to me that there is a *consistent pattern* running through everything that we do, through every aspect of our culture, our thought, our economy, our whole way of life. What this pattern is I cannot say clearly, but I believe it is now the most vitally important thing for all of us ... to try to arrive at a clear, cogent statement of our ills, so that we may begin to correct them.... It seems that our remedies are instinctively those which aggravate the sickness: *the remedies are expressions of the sickness itself*. I would almost dare to say that the sickness is perhaps a very real and very dreadful hatred of life.<sup>42</sup>

The tone and message here is reminiscent of the opening paragraph in *Seven Storey Mountain*. Once again, the vision of a world imprisoned in its own fear and hatred is set before us. This vision of the world, however, does not stand alone. Merton continues to collect moments of a deeper vision of things.

Another touchstone moment considered by Weis is the experience at Fourth and Walnut on the 19th of March 1958. The vision that emerged at that moment was, as already noted, significant for Merton. After narrating an account of the event, Merton explains its significance:

Again, that expression, *le point vierge*, (I cannot translate it) comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely .... I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.<sup>43</sup>

The epiphany in Louisville provided for Merton insight into humanity’s relationship with God that in his words makes “all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish.” The hidden wholeness that he has sought from his earliest years is here revealed and eventually becomes for him an understanding of God as the hidden ground of Love.<sup>44</sup> This awareness of the *point of nothingness* underlying all things was essential to Merton’s formation as a monk and central to the vision he wished to impart to the world. He found in the notion of *le point vierge* an insight that influenced his approach to social issues.

Weis’s skillful unfolding of Merton’s environmental consciousness reveals a vision of “life itself, fully awake, fully alive, fully aware that it is alive.” She carefully clarifies the ways in which vision *informed* Merton’s interior life. His interior

<sup>41</sup> Weis, *The Environmental Vision*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Weis, *The Environmental Vision*, 12-14.

<sup>43</sup> Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 142.

<sup>44</sup> In a letter to Amiya Chakravarty dated the 13th of April 1967, Merton writes: “The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pneuma ... or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by listening to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations.” See Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 115.

landscape became one with the woods thereby creating within him a “spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being.”<sup>45</sup> To illustrate, Weis quotes Merton’s reflections on the season of Lent wherein nature and spiritual formation resonant with one another:

The first Sunday of Lent, as I now know, is a great feast. Christ has sanctified the desert and in the desert I discovered it. The woods have all become young in the discipline of spring, but it is the discipline of expectancy only. Which one cut more keenly? The February sunlight or the air? There are no buds. Buds are not guessed or even thought of this early in Lent. But the wilderness shines with promise. The land is first in simplicity and strength. Everything foretells the coming of the holy spring. I had never before spoken freely or so intimately with woods, hills, buds, water and sky. On this great day, however, they understood their position and they remained mute in the presence of the Beloved. Only His light was obvious and eloquent. My brother and sister, the light and the water. The stump and the stone. The tables of rock. The blue, naked sky. Tractor tracks, a little waterfall. And Mediterranean solitude. I thought of Italy after my Beloved had spoken and was gone.<sup>46</sup>

The environment is no longer seen as simply the context in which we live or a resource for commerce but rather a sacrament of God’s presence in nature sanctified by Christ. It is through the witness of the woods becoming “young in the discipline of spring” that we enter into the “expectancy” of our interior wilderness that like February days “foretells the coming of the holy spring.” Any distinction between humanity and nature is gone; we have become one with “the light and the water” whom Merton addresses and encourages us to address as “brother and sister.” Merton’s vision of the world is intimate, full of wonder and awe, graced with the Presence of his Beloved. The closing line recalls a moment described in *The Seven Storey Mountain* when, as a college student visiting churches in Rome, Merton’s vision of Christ was first formed.<sup>47</sup>

## Monk

As noted at the outset of this essay, Cunningham and Shannon indicate that any inquiry into Merton’s life and work must keep in mind that he was first and foremost a monk whose vision of the world was cultivated by monastic practices. Monastic life in the Trappist tradition was the most significant formative factor for Merton. While an artist and social critic, his work was rooted in a life centered in Christ. This is most evident from the talks he gave at Gethsemani. From October of 1955 until April of 1965 Merton gave weekly conferences to the young monks. Patrick O’Connell has been editing Merton’s notes from those conferences. The sixth volume provides Merton’s thoughts on the Benedictine vows of obedience, stability, and conversion of life. It becomes clear from the notes that Merton understood that the ultimate purpose of the vows is the “restoration of one’s authentic identity as made in the divine image and the unconditional gift of this true self to its Creator.”<sup>48</sup> Christian monasticism was clearly the primary formative factor in his life.

At the end of the prologue to *The Sign of Jonas*, his second journal book that narrates his initial years in the monastery, Merton writes:

The sign of Jesus promised to the generation that did not understand Him was the “sign of Jonas the prophet” — that is, the sign of His own resurrection. The life of every monk, of every priest, of every Christian is signed with the sign of Jonas, because we all live by the power of Christ’s resurrection. But I feel that my own life is especially sealed with this great sign, which baptism and monastic profession and priestly ordination have burned into the roots of my being, because like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Weis, *The Environmental Vision*, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Weis, *The Environmental Vision*, 105.

<sup>47</sup> *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 109.

<sup>48</sup> Patrick F. O’Connell, ed. *The Life of the Vows, volume six in Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012), liii.

<sup>49</sup> Merton, *Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953), 11.

For Merton, to be a monk meant living the question of what it meant to be a monk. Recognizing that he did not satisfy the definition of monk as defined by others, he was nonetheless committed to being true to his own graces and tasks.<sup>50</sup> And that would mean embracing those paradoxes that had become apparent to him. He was a silent monk whose voice was heard around the world. He was a solitary hermit who stood in solidarity with all humanity. He was a pilgrim lost in the world on his journey to God leaving along the way journal entries, letters, poetry, essays, and graffiti. Those roadside notes reveal that he was never able to say exactly what kind of monk he was. This, however, turned out to be a grace that sustained him. The ambiguities and paradoxes of his vocation contributed to Merton's formation as a monk with a vow of poverty leaving him with only one precious pearl...desire for God.<sup>51</sup>

For Merton, the underlying source of problems facing the modern world is the loss of Wisdom. In order to fully appreciate Merton's focus on Wisdom as the hidden ground of his life and work, we turn our attention to Merton's beautiful prose poems, *Hagia Sophia*. It begins with *Dawn. The Hour of Lauds*:

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom

...It is like the One Christ awakening in all the separate selves that ever were separate and isolated and alone in all the lands of the earth. It is like all minds coming back together into awareness from all distractions, cross-purposed and confusions, into unity of love. It is like the first morning of the world (when Adam, at the sweet voice of Wisdom awoke from nonentity and knew her), and like the Last Morning of the world when all the fragments of Adam will return from death at the voice of Hagia Sophia, and will know where they stand.<sup>52</sup>

As is readily evident from these few lines, here is the beginning of Merton's vision of Christ in the world. It is the vision of a contemplative created from moments of insight woven together by a brilliant intellect and a highly imaginative artist. And, as is equally evident, it is a vision emerging from Merton's lifelong experience extending back to his earliest years as a child of bohemian artists. Consequently, this vision is essential to understanding the depth of his vocation as a monk. Any effort to define what kind of monk he was must begin here.

*Hagia Sophia* is the focus of Christopher Pramuk's recent inquiry into Merton's Christology.<sup>53</sup> In *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* Pramuk draws our attention to the Christ that was the center of Merton's life and the focus of his work. Here we are introduced to the unseen Christ who was for Merton "a Love and a Presence that breaks through into the world, a living symbol and Name" through which the living God is encountered. It was this reality that Merton "chose, at his poetic and prophetic best, to structure theological discourse."<sup>54</sup> Pramuk weaves together theology, philosophy, and literature in order to discern and express the complex patterns of Merton's thought in this poem. His inquiry into the influence of Russian Sophia tradition on *Hagia Sophia* provides an exegetical commentary that reveals the maturing of Merton's theology.

Noting a journal entry from the 25th of April 1957, Pramuk points to Merton's admiration for Bulgakov and Berdyaev's courage to risk mistakes in an effort to "say something great and worthy of God."<sup>55</sup> For Merton, their works revealed

<sup>50</sup> Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 98.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), 83.

<sup>52</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 301.

<sup>53</sup> *The Merton Annual*, 23, eds. Gray Matthews and David Belcastro, celebrated Pramuk's book with a review symposium. The book was reviewed by three Merton scholars: Daniel Horan, Edward Kaplan, and Lynn Szabo. The symposium ends with Pramuk's response. An earlier study of his Christology is George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms; Thomas Merton's Christology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, xxiii.

<sup>55</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 11.

“profound insights into the real meaning of Christianity — which we cannot simply ignore.”<sup>56</sup> Those profound insights contributed significantly to Merton’s imagination and intellect in the creation of *Hagia Sophia* and his vision of Christ in the world.

The journal entry not only informs our appreciation of the poem but also reveals something of importance regarding Merton. He too was willing to risk mistakes. He too sought to say something great and worthy of God. And, he too was aware that whatever was revealed regarding God would result in profound insights into Christianity. The entry continues:

Most important of all — man’s creative vocation to prepare, consciously, the ultimate triumph of Divine Wisdom. Man, the microcosm, the heart of the universe, is the one who is called to bring about the fusion of cosmic and historic process in the final invocation of God’s wisdom and love. In the name of Christ and by his power, man has worked to accomplish.... Our life is a powerful Pentecost in which the Holy Spirit, ever active in us, seeks to reach through our inspired hands and tongues into the very heart of the material world created to be spiritualized through the work of the Church, the Mystical Body of the Incarnate Word of God.<sup>57</sup>

Merton’s words say much about his monastic vocation and vision of the world redeemed in Christ. What kind of monk was he? He was a monk who turned his inspired hands as a writer and artist to the difficult task of awakening humanity to the spiritual dimensions of life. This becomes most apparent while reading *Hagia Sophia*.

Fortunately for the reader, the poem is included in its entirety at the end of the book.<sup>58</sup> Pramuk draws the reader’s attention time and again to the poem. Consequently, the reader returns to the poem, less with an analytical mind than a contemplative one to catch a glimpse of the hidden Christ to whom Merton bears witness. This reading experience underscores what makes this book on Merton’s Christology uniquely important. It is not simply a book about Merton’s understanding a theological doctrine but an invitation to an experiential approach to Christology. This is what we have come to expect from a monk who was primarily concerned with the transformation of the human heart and mind enlightened by Wisdom. The book is thus more than a theological study for scholars. It makes theology relevant and available to the lives of persons who seek, as Milosz noted, a vision of the world redeemed in Christ.<sup>59</sup>

As a personal rather than simply an intellectual inquiry, Pramuk traces the emergence of Sophia in Merton’s life and writings. Pramuk presents Merton’s Christology as a story-shaped theology of God retrieved from Merton’s life as presented in his journals, letters, essays, and poetry. Here we see Merton as awakened time and again by the mysterious figure of Sophia. Pramuk explains:

First, there was a dream (February 28, 1958) in which a young Jewish girl named “Proverb” came to embrace him, a dream Merton later confessed to the Russian poet and novelist Boris Pasternak (October 23, 1958). She then came to him in the crossroads of a great city (March 18, 1958), the much-celebrated epiphany at the crossroads of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, Kentucky. She found him again in the burning woods near Gethsemani (March 19, 1959), this time in the faces of local farm children, “poor little Christs with holes in their pants and ... sweet, sweet voices.” Over a year later, (July 2, 1960), on the Feast of Visitation, she came in the guise of a nurse, whose gentle whispers awakened him early one morning as he lay in the hospital. The experience strangely prefigured Merton’s encounter with “M.,” the nurse with whom he would fall in love in the spring of 1966: “At 5:30, as I was dreaming, in a very quiet hospital, the soft voice of the nurse awoke me gently from my dream — and it was like awakening for the first time from all the dreams of my life — as if

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<sup>56</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 12.

<sup>57</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* includes seven of Merton’s drawings placed at the outset of the Preface and following six chapters. They include images of a woman (Mary/Sophia), mother and child, and Christ unveiling the Old Testament/Sophia. The book also includes with the poem a line-cut of Victor Hammer’s triptych painting of “Hagia Sophia Crowning the Young Christ.” Merton saw the triptych while at the Hammer’s home for lunch.

<sup>59</sup> The importance of Pramuk’s book for lay persons became evident when a local Merton Study Group read the book over the course of a year. Without exception, the consensus was that it was the most significant book that they had read in years. This is a tribute to both Merton and Pramuk whose respect and concern for the reader is most apparent.

the Blessed Virgin herself, as if Wisdom had awakened me. We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the feminine voice, the voice of the Mother: yet she speaks to everyone and in everything. Wisdom cries out in the market place — “if anyone is little let him come to me.”<sup>60</sup>

The author identifies and clarifies the significance of these epiphanies during the last decade of Merton’s life. In so doing, he stresses two important insights that are true not only with reference to Merton’s Christology but also to the intention of Merton’s vocation as a monk committed to sharing with the world the redemption for which humanity longs. The vision of Sophia, the Hidden Christ, is not an abstraction but rather a reality deeply integrated in the very fabric of every aspect of life: religion, politics, economics, and various social issues. Furthermore, it is not limited to a moment of enlightenment but “an experience or event of being embraced by love and mercy, *the warmth of her embrace and of her heart.*”<sup>61</sup>

This personal experience of God was essential to Merton’s life and work. As noted by Pramuk, “If we keep in mind the social and intellectual fragmentation of the 1960’s, irruptions never far from Merton’s view, it is enough to truly wonder, how did the center hold for Merton? What kept him from falling apart?”<sup>62</sup> The situation was particularly challenging for this was an “era in which a thousand voices proclaim, many quite credibly, that there really is *no center.*”<sup>63</sup> The search for a center was at the heart of Merton’s pilgrimage. The monastery was the desert in which the journey took place. And, it was there that he discovered Christ, not as a theological idea but as a living reality of the hidden and unseen Christ/Sophia at work in the world. It was because of his awareness of this inclusive Presence that Merton was free to embrace the world. Merton’s expansive vision of God’s redemptive work in Christ/Sophia witnesses to a world in which humanity and nature are embraced as brother and sister.<sup>64</sup> This Christology, so skillfully retrieved from the Merton corpus and beautifully represented by Pramuk, was the heart of a monk whose vision opened possibilities for the world as it prepared to move into the 21st century.

## Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have observed the convergence of two questions. On the one hand, what kind of monk was Merton? On the other hand, what was his vision of the world redeemed in Christ? Lipsey, Weis, and Pramuk have each provided valuable perspectives on Merton’s monastic vocation and together provide an image of Merton far more complicated than first presented by Alred Graham in 1953. Simply stated, he was a monk who revealed in his life and work a vision of the world redeemed in Christ. Drawing on his multiple talents as writer and artist, he sought to share that vision with the world. His concern for and commitment to that world extended the vision to all aspects of modern society with prophetic insight that remains relevant to readers today. Perhaps most importantly, we have seen that he was a Christian monk within the Cistercian tradition of the Roman Catholic Church who labored long and hard to be a faithful servant to his Lord. Whatever may be added to our understanding of Merton legacy in the future, this must not be forgotten or diminished. Those who may have reservations regarding his faithfulness need only to read Merton’s essay on Clement of Alexandria, a Church Father whom he greatly admired:

The voice of Clement is the voice of one who fully penetrates the mystery of *pascha Chrisiti*, the Christian exodus from this world in and with the Risen Christ. He was the full triumphant sense of victory that is authentically and perfectly Christian: a victory over death, over sin, over the confusions and dissensions of this world, with its raging cruelty and its futile concerns. A victory which leads not to contempt of man and of the world, but on the contrary to a true, pure, serene love, filled with compassion, able to discover and to “save” for Christ all that is good and noble in man, in society, in philosophy and in humanistic culture. This is the

<sup>60</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> Pramuk, *Sophia*, 285.



greatness and genius of Clement, who was no Desert Father. He lived in the midst of Alexandria, moved amid its crowds, knew its intellectual elite, and loved them all in Christ.<sup>65</sup>

As was true for Clement of Alexandria, so was it for Thomas Merton. Both men, devoted to Christ, loved their fellow citizens without reservation or discrimination, seeking to realize with their generation a world redeemed by God in Christ.

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<sup>65</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Selections from The Protreptikos* (New York: New Directions, 1962).