

# Book Reviews

*Seeds of Hope: Thomas Merton's  
Contemplative Message/Semillas de  
esperanza: El mensaje contemplativo de  
Thomas Merton*

Edited by Fernando Bertrán Llavador  
and Paul M. Pearson

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*Reviewed by Malgorzata Poks*

When asked by Pope Paul VI to write a message from contemplatives to the world, Merton squirmed under the preposterous assumption that he should have any 'message', which would, moreover, be articulate and 'safe' to deliver. Yet, it was not the article he produced on that particular occasion, but his whole life that was and continues to be Merton's 'contemplative message' to the world, as evidenced by this bilingual collection of nine papers, originally presented at an International Thomas Merton Conference in Ávila, Spain in 2006. As the foreword specifies this event attended by over 350 participants from 19 countries was devoted to gathering the 'seeds of hope' that Merton had lavishly scattered throughout his writings. The presenters richly documented the centrality of the theme of hope in Merton's life and work

by approaching the subject from a variety of angles and perspectives, which obviously corresponded to their own professional interests.

In the opening essay, Fernando Bertrán Llavador first maps the terrain by offering a handful of reflections on and a survey of definitions of the key term, and next goes on to develop Merton's understanding of resurrection as 'the great feast of Christian hope'. Paul Pearson focuses on the subject of his recent research, namely, Merton's anti-art, to argue that in anguished times the light of hope must, of necessity, shine in darkness, and this is what aligns Merton's abstract drawings and antipoetic poetry with the Christian apophatic tradition. Jim Forest's paper, which centers on Merton's love of icons might almost form a companion piece to Pearson's. Calling Merton 'a living bridge linking Christians East and West', Forest sees the monk's interest in Byzantine art as an 'aesthetic heresy' in the context of the iconoclastic 1960s and his love of the apophatic tradition of Orthodox Christianity as an important contribution to preparing a way of reconciliation between the Christian East and the Christian West.

Bridge-building is also of key importance for Bonnie Thurston's reflections on Merton's fascination with Islam, and with Moorish Spain in particular. To me

this is the centerpiece of the entire collection: informative and engaging, richly documented, persuasive and carefully argued, Thurston's essay recovers in the history of Islamic-Christian relations some authentic seeds of hope for our troubled world's transcultural maturity. To quote, 'Al-Andalus and Thomas Merton can serve as signposts toward another way [other than cultural fragmentation]. "Transcultural maturity" and "transcultural integration": is this not the goal of conferences like this and the vocation of people like us?' (p. 121). There!

The essay by Francisco Rafael de Pascual, which explores the journey of Merton's life, is organized around the metaphor of the anchor and the risks of being unmoored. While the author skillfully interweaves crucial episodes from the monk's life with stages of the prophet Jonah's journey towards the realization that even in Nineveh there are seeds of hope, it is this realization which constitutes 'the secret hope and the hoped for secret' of the essay's title, he occasionally gets unmoored himself in the sea of digressions and polemics. For example, commenting on the unfixed anchor of the postmodern world, Pascual launches into a confused diatribe against the closing 'circle of the double truth of modernity', which, supposedly, 'introduces us to a neoromanticism of the myth and the Eros' (p. 38), without specifying what he means by those terms and without supporting his claims by any substantial evidence. And there is more to come. I wonder whether by denouncing wholesale this unspecified 'mythological drift' Pascual is not turning a blind eye to the seeds of hope that lie scattered in the furrows of a contemporary Nineveh. On the whole,

one can have a rough time repairing the chain to keep this text's anchor in place.

In Sonia Petisco Martínez's paper entitled "'O Sweet Escape! O Smiling Flight!" Commentaries on a Selection of Poems by Thomas Merton' it seems as if we lose the thread of hope altogether. One suspects that the piece originated as a reading of nine Merton poems that Martínez translated into Spanish, with added commentary. While the commentary provides an insightful background for the verses one might find issue with the translator's claim that it is a 'wonderful selection of poems' (p. 61) (Merton's 'Hymn of not much praise for New York City' for instance, strikes me as sentimental and grossly oversimplified, rather than 'wonderful'). I also question the whole idea of publishing a paper in this collection focused on hope that never once references this theme. Moreover, *Historia Monachorum*, evoked as a background for the 'Macarius' poem was written by Rufinus, not Rubinus, as the text wrongly claims (p.62). That much said, I confess that a lover of Merton's poetry will feel rewarded upon discovering a rare Merton piece (uncollected in the *Collected Poems*), 'The Sting of Conscience' which was a major enlightening experience for me.

For the rest of the volume: Sanjuanist Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes recovers the message of hope in the mystical theology of Merton and St. John of the Cross; Erlinda Paguio inscribes a set of almost unbelievable circumstances in Merton's life in the figure of hope understood as 'an unexpected, incomprehensible and total gift'; and Father James Conner, Merton's co-religionist, provides touching reminiscences of Merton as a 'rare indi-

vidual', authentic and fully human, whose numerous gifts continue to enrich us. The essays are followed by a list of contributors with a short biographical description of each.

On the whole, while I feel that exploring the theme of hope is of crucial importance to our times and *Seeds of Hope* contains a number of intriguing insights that can guide us through our personal and collective nights (my favorites were the contributions by Pearson, Thurston and Conner), I would have appreciated more disciplined writing with fewer rambling digressions where the aim seems to be to display the presenter's erudition.

**Malgorzata Poks** is the author of the recent *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* and has delivered papers at the last two Thomas Merton Society Conferences in the U.K.

#### A Meeting of Angels

The correspondence of Thomas Merton with Edward Deming & Faith Andrews  
 Edited by Paul M. Pearson  
 Broadstone Books  
 Frankfort, KY, 2008  
 ISBN 978-0-9721144-9-3  
 (hbk) 118 pages  
 \$25

Reviewed by *Thea Van Dam*

**T**his correspondence, here published for the first time by Dr. Paul Pearson, follows seamlessly his earlier work on the Shaker Community entitled *Seeking Paradise*. The publication inevitably throws light on the personalities of the corre-

spondents and emphasises particularly, for us, Merton's great capacity for friendship, his compassion and enthusiasm to share his boundless knowledge.

In his introduction, Dr. Pearson gives us a brief but important history of the friendship between Edward Deming and Faith Andrews and Thomas Merton. His final paragraph gently offers us a treat in store:

In this volume of correspondence we are invited to partake with Thomas Merton and Edward Deming and Faith Andrews both in their enthusiasm and their affection, for the Shakers and for each other, and to join with them in the Communion of Saints and in the Shaker belief in the spiritual presence of their departed believers. Their correspondence manifests a rare meeting of spirits, indeed it is the celebration of a meeting of angels.

The letters follow. Edward Deming Andrews, already a leading Shaker scholar, had heard that Merton intended writing a book on the Shakers and he wrote to offer him support. Merton immediately expressed his appreciation of Andrews' work and told him of his deep interest in the Shaker spirit and Shaker craftsmanship. In his typical forthright manner, Merton wrote, 'Certainly a Cistercian ought to be in a good position to understand the Shaker spirit'. He assured Andrews of his full permission to quote him, '... if anything I have said can be of the slightest help, I will be delighted'. Merton stressed, 'I want to keep in touch'. In his