BOOK REVIEW

Merton and Indigenous Wisdom, edited by Peter Savastano. Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2019. PP. 304.

> There are all kinds of ways to God, and ours [Christianity] is only one of many.[1] – Thomas Merton.

Thomas Merton (1915–1968) is likely one of the most widely recognized and influential Christian monks of the twentieth century. The American Trappist monk's life stood for what was most hopeful in the Catholic Church, especially given the advent of the Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965 and the crisis of faith that has ensued. He was avidly interested and involved in dialogue between the diverse religious and spiritual traditions of the world, while upholding the value and importance of living according to his own religion of the Christian tradition. Merton was a prolific writer, producing a massive *corpus* during his life, which adopted a "catholic" or universal approach to seeing the same underlying divine Reality in all the world's religions. The essays contained within this seventh volume of the Fons Vitae Thomas Merton Series include an examination by international scholars of distinct disciplinary backgrounds of Merton's interest in and concern for the First Peoples.

To embark on a survey of the First Peoples' religion and lifeways requires a decolonization of the human psyche from the narratives and fictions that have been assimilated into the mind and taken to be true and real. In the Introduction to this work Peter Savastano, an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Religious Studies at Seton Hall University, indicates that Merton's initial step toward reclaiming the sacred, which is neither of the East nor West, or of the North or South, for that matter, is in "divesting his mind from the prison of his ethnocentric, imperialistic attitudes and beliefs, all of which he inherited from the European and Euro-American perspectives that had shaped his life and his education." (p. xvi) Merton speaks directly to the need for the "decolonization of the mind" (p. xvi) when he writes, "the greatest sin of the West is above all its unmitigated arrogance toward the rest of the human race." (p. 135)

The depth to which Merton was involved in what he viewed as a spiritual renewal describes his life's vocation:

> I have a clear obligation to participate, as long as I can, and to the extent of my abilities, in every effort to help a spiritual and cultural renewal of our time…. To emphasize [and] clarify the living content of spiritual traditions...by entering...deeply into their disciplines and experiences, not for myself only but for all my contemporaries…. This for the restoration of man's sanity and balance, that he may return to the ways of freedom and of peace, if not in my time, at least someday soon.[2]

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[1] Thomas Merton. 2008. "A Life in Letters: In His Own Words," in *A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection*, eds. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen, New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 8.

[2] Thomas Merton. 1997. "Journal Entry—August 22, 1961," in *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years (The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol. 4: 1960-1963)*, ed. Victor A. Kramer, New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 155.

When surveying the First Peoples, Merton writes cautiously, "We must not be too romantic about all this. There would be no point in merely idealizing primitive men and archaic culture." (p. 79) He understood all too well that with the loss of the sense of the sacred in the contemporary world, it was easy to idealize the past, especially the indigenous peoples. Yet the First Peoples' defensive against the genocide and brutality waged upon them has not come to an end; it continues into the present. Merton laments that "the Indian…is permitted to have a human identity only in so far as he conforms to ourselves and takes upon himself our identity." (p. 108) It is in the divergence between the traditional world and that of modernism that the tension and conflict exist.

In a moving and revealing comment Merton writes, "I have not forgotten about the Indians" (p. 97), and adds in another correspondence, "I agree with what you say about the religious values of the Indians. You are right a thousand times over. The history of the conquest was tragic." (p. 107) Merton goes to the extent of emphasizing an obligation to the First Peoples: "We have an enormous debt to repay to the Indians, and we should begin by recognizing the spiritual richness of the Indian genius." (p. 113)

Through envisioning the Divine in all creation, seeing it as an emanation of the Holy, as have ecological saints of the Christian tradition, such as St. Benedict of Nursia (480–543), St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226), St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) and St. Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179), is akin to the First Peoples seeing the created order as a theophany of the Great Spirit. It is this understanding that allows the human being to relate to the natural world and connect "with a different way of being…and its implications for how to live" (p. 89). Through this integral ecological consciousness, a sustainable way of living may be realized, a way beyond the "profound dehumanization and alienation of modern Western man" (p. 105) and its current ecological crisis.

Merton understood on an intrinsic level that abiding in God according to his own religion or in the Great Spirit of the First Peoples was the reality sought by all regardless of their religious or spiritual tradition. Regarding individuals seeking out mystical experiences or consciousness expansion as Merton witnessed during the counterculture 1960s or even in today's New Age spirituality, it is important to note that due to his own monastic training he grew to distrust subjective experience. He denounced "taking of one's subjective experiences so seriously that it becomes more important than truth, more important than God. Once spiritual experience becomes objectified, it turns into an idol." (p. 151) After all none of the saints and sages of the world's religions were seeking experiences in and of themselves or experiences for the sake of experiences; while experiences certainly occurred, they were not treated at face value but with utmost scrutiny and were more often than not given little importance. Merton valued spiritual direction as provided in the religions and how such experiences were contextualized and consequently interpreted by qualified guides on the path. He points out,

> [T]he Indian was not left to deal with his vision person alone: the visions and indications required comment and approval from the more experienced men of the tribe, the elders, the medicine men and the chiefs. In other words, they had a better and more accurate knowledge of the language of vision. The young

> Indian might interpret his vision one way, and the elders might proceed to show him that he was quite wrong. He remained free to disobey them and follow his own interpretation, but if he did, he ran the risk of disaster. (p. 156)

It is from this perspective that Merton critically assesses the use of psychedelics or entheogens in the present day, especially when utilized outside a traditional context by non-indigenous peoples.

Merton recognized that it was through "submitting oneself to God" (p. 68) that traditional spiritual healing occurred, which was in essence the same approach of the First Peoples through the Great Spirit. For many in the contemporary world who no longer identify with a faith tradition that they were born into or with any religion, for that matter, they often describe nature to be sacred and healing, reminiscent of the First Peoples reverence, which Merton addresses: "The silence of the woods whispered, to the man who listened, a message of sanity and healing." (p. 103)

Merton and Indigenous Wisdom is a noteworthy collection of essays by scholars from diverse disciplines illustrating Merton's most substantive attempts to "see from within" the First Peoples' ways of seeing. To do this, he aims to expose "the dark lining of the 'civilized' Western mind" (p. 239) that reduces the First Peoples to an exotic object of fascination, an anonymous, dehumanized "homogeneous mass" (p. 240). Merton's words are encouraging: "There is great hope for the world in the spiritual emancipation of the Indians." (p. 117) For Merton, the notion of the "other" needed to be integrated into oneself, as he viewed all of life and human beings to be interconnected in the Divine. His universal or "catholic" approach to all things sacred is apparent: "To me, Catholicism is not confined within the boundaries of a culture, a nation, a period of time, a race" (p. 263). Furthermore, as is indicated in the Christian tradition: "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me." (Matthew 25:40) It is in recognition of human diversity in the mirror of religious pluralism, which certainly includes the First Peoples, that we pronounce the Lakota prayer *Mitakuye Oyasin*, "We are all related."

Mr. SAMUEL BENDECK SOTILLOS, Practicing Psychotherapist. Email: samuelbendeck@yahoo.com.