

dealing with distractions and a plea to understand that prayer is really a process of “collapsing into God” (58). In her address at Nazareth College (63-80), Luke divided her reminiscences of Merton into three periods: early Merton who with his wide thinking was good at balancing paradoxes; the 1965 Merton who was carefully integrating his studies of Eastern mysticism with Christianity, notably the prayer of the heart, the Jesus Prayer, and the Rosary; and the traveling Merton who hoped for an opportunity to pray openly with all religions on his Asian journey.

While Merton scholars and aficionados know Luke as Merton’s faithful friend, one of the founders of the ITMS, and founder of the Thomas Merton Center for Creative Exchange in Denver, women religious of a “certain age” know Mother/Sister Mary Luke Tobin in her own right. As the Superior General of the Loretto Sisters from 1958-70, Luke was widely recognized as a prophetic leader. She was influential in the formation of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women and in 1964 was elected President of its evolved configuration, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR). As Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister noted at the fiftieth anniversary celebration of LCWR (2006), Luke was a “bearer of the vision.” In addition to her position as official auditor at the Second Vatican Council, Luke was involved throughout her religious life with issues of social justice. In the 1970s she was part of the social justice movement of Church Women United, an ecumenical group supporting justice, peace, and human rights for women. Her obituary in the *National Catholic Reporter* (Aug. 25, 2006) notes her support for the ordination of women, the struggles of the United Farm Workers, her opposition to nuclear war, as well as to unsafe mining and environmental practices at the Blue Diamond Mining Company. She took part in non-violent actions at the government’s nuclear arsenal in Rocky Flats, Colorado, the Nevada nuclear test site, and was arrested for civil disobedience at the Air Force Academy and in the Capitol Rotunda. In addition to inviting notable speakers to address the Loretto community (e.g. Sister Theresa Kane and Frs. Edward Schillebeeckx and Bernard Haring), she was an avid reader, keeping up on theology and current events. Never a mind at rest, Luke told me during our last visit together two years before she died that every day she read one or two pages of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Orbis, 2002) and learned more about Merton and his life of prayer.

Taken together, this record of Merton’s and Luke’s interactions for the period of 1960-68, with supporting photographs, is a worthwhile read. Of particular value are the several forewords and introductions that reveal the history of land purchases by the two congregations and set the scene for weaving the lives of these two spiritual giants. Thanks to scrupulous editing by Bonnie Thurston, multiple footnotes identify scriptural and journal references and offer additional information about the context for these talks. Each entry is preceded by a brief head note describing the behind-the-scenes events that testify to the truth of this remarkable friendship in which Merton “laughed a great deal,” felt at home, and appreciated the “wonderful, salutary honesty of Loretto and of Mother Luke!” (7). Indeed, Merton and Luke were, as Merton says, “neighbors in a valley that is still lonely . . . both hidden in the same mystery of Our Lady’s Sorrow and Solitude in the Lord’s Passion” (3).

Discerning Strange Voices

Review of

The Voice of the Stranger

By James Conner, OCSO, David Scott and Bonnie Thurston

Stratton-on-the-Fosse, Somerset, UK: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland,
2008

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Reviewed by **Matthew Emile Vaughan**

The Voice of the Stranger is a compilation of three essays and a Eucharistic homily from the Seventh General Meeting and Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, which took place on April 4-6, 2008 at Oakham School, the boarding school that Merton attended in his adolescence. *The Voice of the Stranger* is only 58 pages and saddle-stitched, making it feel more like an issue of a journal than a book. I will, therefore, use the term “booklet” to describe it. As the title suggests, its central theme is that of “the stranger.” Each of the three authors addresses that general theme in a radically different way. There are, however, unifying threads. Each author challenges stereotypical ideas about who is and is not a “stranger,” in ways that allow Merton to speak to situations that deeply haunt the world today.

James Conner, OCSO, is the author of the first essay, entitled “The Voice of the Stranger: A Manifesto for the 21st Century.” The goal of this manifesto, in Conner’s mind, is unity. Conner begins his homiletic essay by stating the obvious: we live in a polarized world. Humanity is sharply divided, be it from political affiliations, social status, or religious confession. This is just as true in the twenty-first century as it was in Merton’s lifetime. As Conner (through Merton) so poignantly clarifies, fear is often at the root of the “us and them” dichotomies that determine the stranger. Understanding and overcoming our fear of the stranger (through dialogue and communication) is perhaps Merton’s great call to the twenty-first century. Merton internalized this fear – embracing the stranger, seeing Christ in and among all people. In a passage that summarizes Merton’s ministry, Conner argues, “The whole mission of Jesus Christ was to reestablish that unity in God and in one another which was our original creation” (3). Conner sees the Eucharist as the springboard from which Christians embark on this business of unity. In concluding, Conner argues that Diarmuid O’Murchu’s book *Quantum Theology: Spiritual Implications of the New Physics* (Crossroad, 2004) offers a helpful metaphor. By recognizing the interconnectivity of physical existence, one can (and should) see a parallel for Christian life – highlighting the “oneness” of humanity in spite of fear and differences. I appreciated Conner’s perceptive indictment of relational divisions, and his reading of Merton was fair and balanced. Conner aptly reminds us that if anyone embodied the call to overcome the barriers of “us and them,” surely it was Merton. None of Conner’s theses, however, addresses uniquely twenty-first-century problems, and his treatment of the issue of relating to the

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stranger raised questions he did not address: how does one discern the voice of God within the stranger? How do we define this “unity” and “inclusion” in a world of religious pluralism – and maintain confessional integrity?

In the second essay, entitled “Brothers in Prayer and Worship: The Merton/Aziz Correspondence, An Islamic-Christian Dialogue,” Bonnie Thurston changes the course of the volume to address interreligious dialogue. Thurston generally introduces the history and content of the fraternal correspondence between Merton and Abdul Aziz (34 letters, ranging from November 1960 until April 1968). Louis Massignon suggested that Aziz contact Merton in order to learn about Christian mysticism; he flatteringly described Merton to Aziz “as *simurgh*, the king of soaring birds in Persian mythology” (22). Aziz was a Pakistani government worker and student of Sufi mysticism already familiar with Merton, having read *The Ascent to Truth* in 1952. The relationship was rich with spiritual insight: the two discussed spirituality, exchanged books, and prayed for one another. Of particular importance to Thurston’s essay were prayer, spiritual practices, the Islamic theology of *Tawhid* (which she terms “the oneness of God”), and the practice of *Khalwah* (“solitary retreat” in her words). Islam captivated Merton, and he frequently used Islamic language and imagery in his letters to Aziz. Thurston offers a succinct reminder of the importance of this correspondence by highlighting the work of several other scholars (most notably Sidney Griffith) who have developed the implications of the Merton-Aziz correspondence in more detail. Merton’s respectful interaction with Islam speaks forcefully to England and America in the twenty-first century, reminding us of the importance of appreciating Islam and interreligious dialogue. His humble relationship with Aziz reminds the Church that it is not God that determines who is and is not the stranger; rather, it is the one who is unwilling to listen to voices unlike his or her own. As I reflect on the correspondence, I am convinced I am the stranger – eavesdropping on a conversation between friends. It is a conversation to which I need to pay closer attention.

The third essay, “The Poet as Stranger,” is David Scott’s treatment of a theme that neither of the other authors developed in detail: Merton as stranger. To illustrate Merton’s “strangeness,” Scott discusses the influences on and content of Merton’s poetry (as well as its role in the formation of Merton’s faith). In the first half of the essay, Scott reflects on Merton’s interactions with the poetry of William Blake, illustrating the formative function of poetry by discussing Blake’s 1789 poem “The Little Black Boy.” Although Scott gives a lengthy explication of this poem (or at least Mark Van Doren’s reading of it), I remain somewhat skeptical that it is an appropriate metaphor for Merton’s redemptive approach to social issues in the twentieth century. In what I see as a progressive contrast to Blake, Scott shifts the focus to Merton’s “Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll” – which enforces Merton’s indicting solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement. In the second half of the essay, Merton’s brilliant poem “Elias – Variations on a Theme” serves as a metaphor for understanding Merton’s poetic and spiritual journey. Rooted in immediate and tangible things (Western tradition, woods at Gethsemani, etc.), Merton moves toward “unfamiliar territory” (social concern, Eastern traditions, Latin America, etc.). Scott then perceptively asks, “Does the love of and need for poetry make one strange?” “The Poet as Stranger” seems to be a transcript of Scott’s actual lecture manuscript. His style is, therefore, less formal than the other two writers – especially contrasted with Thurston’s more academic style – and occasional grammatical errors hinder its flow. While (I am sure) this poetic diction and lighter tone made for an engrossing

lecture, the printed version is somewhat disorienting – not to mention the abruptness of the essay’s ending. Despite the stylistic weaknesses of his essay, however, I appreciated Scott’s suggestive elucidation of the various ways in which Merton was a stranger to his world: he was an orphan, an intellectual, a poet, a monk, and a social activist. Scott’s exhilarating treatment of “Elias,” though, was the highlight of this essay.

The booklet concludes with a brief (two-page) Eucharistic homily by Jim Conner (for the third Sunday of Easter, Year A). Referencing St. Luke’s Emmaus narrative, and a rich passage from Pope Benedict XVI, Conner asks if we are willing to recognize Christ in the strangers within our world. Many of the themes of his essay (a united humanity, Eucharist as service to the stranger, etc.) are present. This homily is a call to ministry, love, and reconciliation; it is a beautiful conclusion to the volume.

My only critique of the booklet: two of the three contributors (Conner and Thurston) are American. I would have benefitted from a more European reading of Merton in this volume, given that the British cousin of the ITMS published it. Other than the inconvenience of endnotes (I seem to be the only person who prefers footnotes), the booklet was informative and engaging. Reading *The Voice of the Stranger* left me wishing I had attended the conference. Or more specifically, I longed for the opportunity for post-lecture dialogue with the speakers, Merton enthusiasts, and attendees. Perhaps this is because the best ideas come about in community – sometimes even with strangers.

To obtain a copy of *The Voice of the Stranger*, simply complete and submit the order form at www.thomasmertonsociety.org/voice.htm (there are order forms for delivery to both the United States and the United Kingdom).