

“The Age of Rosemarys”: Thomas Merton’s Engagement with Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Haughton

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In his September 3, 1967 letter to Hugh Garvey, an editor at Templegate Publishers, Thomas Merton suggests that “Historians of theology will quite possibly look back on our age as the ‘Age of Rosemarys’ Or perhaps the ‘Age of the Mothers of the Church.’”¹ Merton makes this assertion after his appreciative reading of Rosemary Haughton’s *The Transformation of Man*, a book that Templegate published that year, and a book that Merton found to be particularly illuminating. Garvey relayed Merton’s remarks to Haughton and, after a brief exchange of letters with Merton, Haughton came to visit the Abbey of Gethsemani in October of 1967.² After this visit, Haughton’s insights continued to echo in and resonate with Merton. For instance, during a December 1967 retreat for contemplative sisters at Gethsemani, Merton mentions *The Transformation of Man*, and in conversation with Haughton’s work, asserts that “Theology really happens in relations between people.”³ In fact, Merton’s engagement with Haughton, which involved not only his reading of her writing and his grappling with her ideas, but a relational encounter and exchange, conveys a deeper pattern present in Merton’s life. Like Haughton, Merton embodies an understanding that theological insight emerges in and through relationships between people.

Though Merton does not explicitly identify an additional Rosemary in his September letter to Garvey, he is almost certainly pointing toward Rosemary Radford Ruether, with whom he exchanged nearly forty letters from August 12, 1966 through February 18, 1968.⁴ In Merton’s

1. September 3, 1967 letter to Hugh Garvey, in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 174; subsequent references will be cited as “WF” parenthetically in the text.

2. See Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 4; subsequent references will be cited as “OSM” parenthetically in the text.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 76.

4. The complete correspondence is found in Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995); subsequent references will be

encounter with Ruether we see a similar pattern to the one we see in his engagement with Haughton. Merton's receptive grappling with Ruether's insights quickly evolves from intellectual encounter, through the vehicle of reading, to interpersonal exchange. This paper attends to Thomas Merton's interactions with the work and worlds of Rosemary Haughton and Rosemary Radford Ruether, two pivotal and innovative thinkers whose writing and lives have contributed significantly to post-Vatican II Catholicism. This paper highlights the theological and theoretical implications, as well as the concrete contours, of Merton's exchanges with the Rosemarys. By analyzing Merton's engagement with Haughton and Ruether, this paper illuminates his relational approach to theological insight and religious truth.⁵

Theology Happening between People: Haughton & Merton

Rosemary Haughton was born in Chelsea, England in 1927, to Peter Dunham Luling and Sylvia Thompson Luling, a prolific novelist.⁶ The eldest of three daughters, Haughton was brought up in the Church of England, which her family infrequently attended (see Ryan 33). As a young woman, Haughton found herself increasingly attracted to encountering God in and through the Catholic Church (or, as she would later refer to it with casual affection, "the Catholic thing").⁷ In 1943, at the age of sixteen, Haughton was baptized Catholic (see Ryan 42). She recalls attending Mass amidst the devastation and destruction of World War II, worshipping in a dark church lit only by altar candles in accordance with the blackouts. One morning, she arrived to "find the church a mass of rubble."⁸

cited as "AHW" parenthetically in the text.

5. The relational approach that Merton so vividly embodies ultimately centers connection, collaboration and conversation as the soil from which insight emerges. This stands in sharp contrast to an understanding of the quest for knowledge as solitary, individualistic and primarily interior. Contemporary feminist theologians aid us in understanding the significance of a relational anthropology and epistemology. For instance, in *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), Jeannine Hill Fletcher emphasizes that "we are fundamentally relational, we exercise creativity under constraint as embedded and embodied beings within this relational nexus, and we have the capacity to think ourselves forward or to know ourselves into interbeing in community with others" (209).

6. See Eilish Ryan, *Rosemary Haughton: Witness to Hope* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997) 29-30; subsequent references will be cited as "Ryan" parenthetically in the text.

7. See Rosemary Haughton, *The Catholic Thing* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1997).

8. Rosemary Haughton, "Re-discovering Church," *Marianist Award Lectures* (1987) 18; available at: http://ecommons.udayton.edu/uscc_marianist_award/18_3; subsequent references will be cited as "Haughton, 'Church'" parenthetically in the text.

Haughton's movement into intimacy with God in and through the Catholic tradition was significantly inspired by her wide and deep reading. Thomas Merton had a special place within this textual landscape. Haughton had been reading the works of Merton with admiration since she was a teenager.⁹ She "encountered Thomas Merton, became somewhat intoxicated with him, and then, as it were, 'grew up' with him, as he struggled, explored, and changed" (Haughton, "Church" 18). She viewed Merton as a "sign and guarantee of the still, vivid, and incorruptible heart in a religion that had all too many obviously deathly and trivial aspects" (Haughton, "Bridge" 53). Haughton's engagement with Merton eventually flowed beyond the boundaries of readership into a conversation marked by relationality and mutuality.

As we have seen, this conversation was sparked by Merton's reading of Haughton's *The Transformation of Man*. In her "Prefatory Note to the New Edition" of this text, which was issued in 1980, Haughton declares that this work has "long been my favorite among my books."¹⁰ In *The Transformation of Man*, Haughton articulates a theology that emerges from attention to the experiences of human beings in their encounters with one another. Merton finds *The Transformation of Man* to be an "admirable book, an existential theology of love and encounter," as well as "a fundamental statement and witness to the salvation event in daily life and in areas where, to an exclusively clerical theology, it was not previously visible" (WF 174). Here, Merton conveys his interest in turning to Haughton as a voice of authority, whose own positionality – as a woman and mother in the Church – affords her unique access to the mystery of salvation in its vast and varied scope. Merton observes that "some of the more interesting theological insights today are coming from women and mothers" and that "Evidently there is an aspect of theology which is not revealed to you until you have a baby, or several, and tried to bring them up" (WF 174).

In October of 1967, Rosemary Haughton visited Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani, in between stops in Minneapolis and Chicago on a lecture tour (see OSM 4). Haughton recalls the fluidity and vibrancy of their conversation, which unfolded over a picnic lunch in the woods (see Haughton, "Bridge" 53). Their exchange "drifted, dipped, jumped, sprinted, like the wind in the branches above" (Haughton, "Bridge" 53).

9. Rosemary Haughton, "Bridge between Two Cultures," *Catholic World* 209 (May 1969) 53 subsequent references will be cited as "Haughton, 'Bridge'" parenthetically in the text.

10. Rosemary Haughton, "Preface" to *The Transformation of Man*, new ed. (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1980).

In the course of this conversation, Haughton "learned how the old forms of monastic life" had been "falling apart," and that new interpretations of monasticism were emerging in their rubble (Haughton, "Bridge" 53). She recalls discussing with Merton the "real cultural task of Christianity," which he understood as an open responsiveness to God and humanity and a capacity to judge oneself, others and the world in reference to the "standard of love" (Haughton, "Bridge" 54). She remembers Merton sharing his photography with her: pictures of watering cans and tree roots, broken baskets and thorns (Haughton, "Bridge" 54). Throughout her encounter, Haughton was "touched by [Merton's] *complete* humanness" (Haughton, "Bridge" 54). Haughton biographer Eilish Ryan emphasizes that this conversation "had a lasting influence on Haughton" (Ryan 51).

In his October 27, 1967 journal entry Merton writes of Haughton, "She is quiet, intelligent, not the obstreperous kind of activist progressive, concerned about a real contemplative life continuing, etc." (*OSM* 4). He recalls taking a picture of the pregnant theologian sitting on the dam by Dom Frederic's Lake (*OSM* 4) and writes, "I hope my picture of that is good" (*OSM* 4). Br. Patrick Hart attests to the fact that the photograph "did indeed turn out well," and that Haughton used it on the dust jacket of her 1972 book, *The Theology of Experience* (*OSM* 4). It is fitting that, since books were the bridge that brought them together, the picture that emerged from their encounter (an image of Haughton seen through the eyes of Merton) would decorate the cover of her book. In this encounter between Haughton and Merton, we glimpse theology happening between people: two appreciative readers, the monk photographing the pregnant theologian, creative cross-pollination animated by mutual curiosity.

Theology Happening between People: Ruether & Merton¹¹

Born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1936, Rosemary Radford Ruether "grew up in a series of matricentric enclaves led by intelligent, articulate, and self-confident women."¹² In 1965, as a 29-year-old scholar raising three children with her husband Herman, Ruether completed her Ph.D. in classics and patristics at the Claremont Graduate School (Ruether, *Quests* 9). In the summer of 1966, Ruether and her family moved to Washington,

11. Material in this section is developed more extensively in my dissertation. See James Robinson, "Merton and Ruether: Toward a Contemplative-Prophetic Ecotheological Anthropology" (2020): *ETD Collection for Fordham University*. AAI27959448. <https://research.library.fordham.edu/dissertations/AAI27959448>.

12. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *My Quests for Hope and Meaning: An Autobiography* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013) 1 (subsequent references will be cited as "Ruether, *Quests*" parenthetically in the text).

DC, where she joined the faculty at Howard University (Ruether, *Quests* 15). In August of that year, she and Merton opened their exchange of nearly forty letters, the collection of which was compiled and edited by Mary Tardiff in 1995, under the title *At Home in the World*.

Ruether wrote her first letter to Merton on August 12, 1966, inspired by the “very kind remarks” that he offered after reading one of her early essays (*AHW* 3). In this essay, titled “Vahanian: The Worldly Church and the Churchly World,”¹³ Ruether articulates a radical ecclesiology in conversation with the work of French “Death of God” theologian Gabriel Vahanian. Ruether advances a critique of the ways in which the institutional Church has co-opted and domesticated the living God, replacing the infinite Creator with an idol of power. She observes a dilemma unfolding, in which those who actively love the Church also find themselves actively resisting the shapes that it has taken, and she argues that such a dilemma is perhaps felt most potently by the “prophetic young Catholic priest” (Ruether, “Vahanian” 57). In a July 25, 1966 journal entry, composed right after reading the essay, Merton records his feelings that Ruether’s piece is a “remarkable – and dangerous!! – article,” and he senses that “Its implications will work in me for a long time.”¹⁴

In Merton’s first letter to Ruether, sent on August 18, 1966, he requests that Ruether send him pieces of writing that she thinks might interest him, and he includes a copy of his own essay, “Christian Humanism”¹⁵ (see *AHW* 3-4). In this letter, Merton lets Ruether know that “I depend to a great extent on the light and love of my friends who keep me informed, notified, alerted, etc.” (*AHW* 4). Reflecting on her correspondence with Merton after the fact, Ruether recalls that “although we were separated by more than twenty years in age, he as a seasoned thinker and I as a neophyte, Merton from the beginning addressed me as an equal” (*AHW* xv).¹⁶ In fact, throughout their correspondence Merton turns to Ruether as a theological authority.

13. Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Vahanian: The Worldly Church and the Churchly World,” *Continuum* 4.1 (Spring 1966) 50-62; subsequent references will be cited as “Ruether, ‘Vahanian’” parenthetically in the text. These “remarks” were sent by Merton to *Continuum* editor Justus Lawler (see *AHW* 3).

14. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 101; subsequent references will be cited as “*LL*” parenthetically in the text.

15. See Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 135-50.

16. Ruether notes in this Introduction to the correspondence that Merton’s stance toward her was not surprising at the time of their exchange, as she indeed “saw [herself] as an equal,” but that it appears “more impressive in retrospect” (xv).

Among the numerous topics that Merton and Ruether discuss throughout their exchange, this paper will highlight the most personal and vulnerable. Though their correspondence was initially animated by Merton's interest in Ruether's ecclesiology, it crescendos into Merton breaking open his own questions about the Church and his place within it to Ruether. In a letter composed on January 29, 1967, Merton writes that he "need[s] the help of a theologian" and he identifies Ruether as "a theologian I trust," and even "Almost the only one" (*AHW* 16). Merton writes:

I know this is a pretty bad letter (guilt about saying all this). But I do wonder at times if the Church is real at all. I believe it, you know. But I wonder if I am nuts to do so. Am I part of a great big hoax? I don't explain myself as well as I would like to: there is a real sense of and confidence in an underlying reality, the presence of Christ in the world which I don't doubt for an instant. But is that presence where we are all saying it is? We are all pointing (in various directions), and my dreadful feeling is that we are all pointing wrong. Could you point someplace for me, maybe? (*AHW* 17)

Ruether replies by assuring Merton that she is "profoundly moved" by his letter (*AHW* 18). She sends Merton the manuscript of her book, *The Church against Itself*, and notes that she grapples with many of Merton's questions directly within it. In *The Church against Itself*, Ruether characterizes the authentic church as "a happening."¹⁷ The Church, Ruether insists in her February letter, is "surely not first of all the institution" (*AHW* 19). For Ruether, the institutional structure serves as a vehicle for transmitting a set of traditions about a reality that is actively happening, but that is not exclusively or even centrally happening within the space of the institution; and that reality is "God's constant renewal of His good creation" (*AHW* 19). Furthermore, Ruether calls into question the generativity of Merton's monasticism and calls him to acknowledge that the church as happening is happening most vividly in cities. Though she emphasizes that she "love[s] the monastic life dearly," and notes that she has been a Third Order Benedictine, she argues that the monastic vocation would best be lived out as a temporary immersion in prayer rather than as a permanent commitment (*AHW* 20).

In a journal entry composed on February 14, 1967, Merton assesses Ruether's manuscript as "important – at least for me" and as "explosive" (*LL* 198). That same day, Merton writes back to Ruether. He expresses his

17. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *The Church against Itself: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Historical Existence for the Eschatological Community* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1967) 159.

gratitude for her perspective, noting that she has assured him that his “own struggle with the institution was not madness, hubris or something” (AHW 21-22). He writes, “I agree with you all along about the hardening of the Church as institution and idol and its becoming against what it ought to be a sign of” (AHW 22). Furthermore, Merton asserts that “what you say about the Church as happening clicks perfectly” (AHW 22). He mentions his own “monumental struggle with monasticism as it now is,” notes that he “still disagree[s] violently with most of the party line policies,” and characterizes himself as a “notorious maverick” in the Trappists (AHW 23). He paints a picture of his own monastic existence as that of a hermit who has been “practically laicized and de-institutionalized,” who rarely wears his habit, and actively maintains “valid and living contact with my friends who are in the thick of things” (AHW 23). He assures Ruether that he is not personally called to move to the city (see AHW 23).

As their dialogue continues to unfold, in a March 1967 letter to Merton, Ruether mentions that she senses he is in a time of personal crisis (see AHW 48). Merton responds four days later by affirming her suspicion, noting that she has “been the catalyst,” and asking her to “be my confessor for awhile: will you please?” (AHW 51). As Merton opens up his struggles at Gethsemani and in the wider Church to Ruether, she replies by detailing her own personal situation. Though she continues to identify as a Catholic theologian, she has rooted herself and her family in an Episcopal parish in Washington, DC called St. Stephen and the Incarnation. She emphasizes the importance of working with institutions by finding or forming a niche within these institutions which is open to radical change and exploration (see AHW 57). The goal, here, is to form an *avant-garde*, to remain rooted in the institution while also accompanying it and those involved in it into the future. “An *avante garde* is an *avante [sic]* for the sake of leading the rest, not leaving them behind” (AHW 59).

Ultimately, Merton would maintain his own *avant-garde* niche in the woods of Gethsemani. While he believed that monasticism required deep and creative transformation, the monastic life remained his vocation. He notes in an April 6, 1967 letter to Ruether that if he is to seek another Church context in which to root himself he would want to find “another honest monastic group” and he mentions the appeal (but current impossibility) of the group started by Ernesto Cardenal in Latin America (see AHW 61). Ruether proposes in a letter sent to Merton in May of 1967 that Christians “should neither obey . . . nor disobey” existing institutional structures, but instead “move out into a new and more authentic possibility,” and she suggests, “I think that is what you are working on in your context too” (AHW 64).

Throughout their letters, Merton and Ruether move from intellectual exchange to relational and vulnerable encounter. Their correspondence involves not only theoretical reflection on the nature of the Church but a deeply personal sharing about their own experiences within the Church. Ruether sends Merton her writing and he sends her his; Ruether sends Merton a Christmas card featuring her 3-year-old daughter Mimi in a protest march (see *AHW* 27) and a pin from St. Stephen's parish (see *AHW* 86). Merton ultimately entrusts Ruether with 27 of what he terms "some far out drawings of mine" – works consisting of black ink brushstrokes – and he suggests the proceeds from sales go to St. Stephen's (see *AHW* 74). He also suggests that, if St. Stephen's would like to keep one of the drawings, he would "be delighted to be 'present' . . . in the form of a calligraphy" (*AHW* 79).

Conclusion: Embodying a Relational Theology

Thomas Merton models a relational approach to theology, compellingly embodying the essential insight that he takes from Rosemary Haughton's work: that theology really happens between people. We see this relational approach emerging in Merton's engagement with both Haughton and Ruether. Although Merton did not physically meet Ruether, he sustained his conversation with her over nearly forty letters sent over an extended period of time. While Merton encountered Haughton in the flesh and continued to think with her insights beyond the scope of this meeting, their correspondence is far more limited. However, as we have seen, a similar pattern emerges in each of these encounters. Merton's engagement with both Haughton and Ruether was initiated by his own act of receptive and engaged reading. He read Ruether's essay and Haughton's book. He was deeply moved by the insights he found in these texts. He conveyed his compliments to the authors, through their editors. He opened conversations with the authors and continued to engage their work.

Through his exchanges with Ruether and Haughton, Merton learns from and converses with those with vantage points inaccessible to him. He turns to Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Haughton, and through his vast correspondence, he turns to a wide web of conversation partners with similarly inaccessible vantage points and sources of insight. He turns to the insights of D. T. Suzuki¹⁸ and Thich Nhat Hanh,¹⁹ he turns

18. See Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki, *Encounter*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press, 1988); see also Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 560-71; subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" in the text.

19. See Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian*

to the insights of Daniel Berrigan²⁰ and Dorothy Day,²¹ he even turns to the insights of Suzanne Butorovich,²² a high-school student in California, with whom he discusses the Beatles and Bob Dylan and the Grateful Dead as well as her underground magazine, in which he publishes his poetry. Merton shows us, through his embodied witness and through the web of letters that document his quest to love God and the neighbor, that theology happens between people. Merton shows us that theology is not the product of a solitary quest, but the fruit of a communal movement.

Practice (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 106-108.

20. See HGL 70-101; see also Gordon Oyer, *Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021) 91-113; subsequent references will be cited as "Oyer" in the text.

21. See Julie Leininger Pycior, *Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, and the Greatest Commandment: Radical Love in Times of Crisis* (New York: Paulist Press, 2020); see also HGL 135-54 and Oyer 25-46.

22. See Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 308-14.