

# THE MERTON ANNUAL

Studies in Culture, Spirituality, and Social Concerns

---

Volume 27

2014

---

Edited by

David Joseph Belcastro    Joseph Quinn Raab

PRAMUK, Christopher. *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters across the Color Line* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), pp. xxv + 213. ISBN 978-0-8146-8210-4 (paper) \$19.95.

Using the tradition of Ignatian spirituality punctuated by the contemplative wisdom of Thomas Merton, Christopher Pramuk escorts the reader on an aesthetic journey across the color line. *Hope Sings, So Beautiful* mediates a graced encounter and, in short, can be described as a theological aesthetics in both form and content. In form, it uses apt illustrations and beautiful lapidary prose, which often led me to a place of contemplation along with the writer. In content, it draws on a mosaic of sacramental or redemptive tales, emerging from places darkly luminous (see 62). Pramuk, for example, appeals to the mysticism of Howard Thurman, contemplates the cross and lynching tree using Billie Holiday's haunting rendition of "Strange Fruit," celebrates the streets with Stevie Wonder and Thomas Merton, and, through the journals of Etty Hillesum, recalls the paradoxical presence of God in the Nazi occupation. Through it all, one experiences a call to theological wholeness that radiates divine beauty (see 50). For Pramuk, *graced encounters* interrupt the prevailing status quo, aiming primarily at our poverty of imagination. Part of the book's significance is tied to the contextual style where he affirms his personal locatedness in academic discourse, the global world of the poor and the African American song circle.

The book has an inner logic that unfolds over nine chapters culminating with the reader being implicitly encouraged to participate in his or her own song circles. Pramuk leads us to ask if we are "willing to let the circle of familiarity be broken open, and the boundaries give way to the coming of the Lord?" He, fittingly, allows the reader an anecdotal glimpse into his own song circle—his family—understood "as a domestic church" (157). Although the text concludes with this appeal to Pramuk's own intimate circle, its scope is significant and suggests that the author is addressing the most inclusive definition of the color line (see xx). As is made clear in his introduction, "hope, like people, is multivalent. It manifests in different shades and colors. It sings in many voices" (xvii).

The "Introduction," moreover, is appropriately realistic about defining racial consciousness. Pramuk is under no illusions here. His appeal is to the blind man of Bethsaida, whose "partial sight and partial blindness" is a fitting illustration of the blindness many labor under and perhaps a critical interruption to those who claim to see (xvii). Pressing Pramuk's use of this parable beyond his intentions, one could even ask if the "trees" are the first witnesses to our blindness: "I see people looking like trees and

walking." Perhaps here, the "circle of reciprocity" is already relativizing our differences. At any rate, Pramuk is already firing our imaginations in the introduction.

Chapter 1, "Entry Points," explicates the personal key in which the author writes. Of the three entry points, i.e., the academy and its racial discourse, the global poor (especially Haiti), and the African American Spirituals tradition, I found the third tradition to be the most intriguing, primarily because it concretely represents the immediate context of Pramuk's theologizing. The choice to approach the issue of race, considering the blind spots and biases he acknowledges, represents the greatest risk—especially in light of current surges in racial tensions in America.

Chapter 2, "Awakenings," is a befitting opening to his more thematic chapters. Here the author appeals strongly to the mystical using Howard Thurman, the African American theologian. It is clear that he aims to pierce the logic of our post-Cartesian consciousness and journey beyond the deleterious nature of our *thought systems* (25). Part of the brilliance of the author's argument is to identify not how racism, sexism, classism and other "-isms" render people *invisible*, but the way in which they make them *visible*. He draws on M. Shawn Copeland's insights to discuss how certain groups are "overdetermined in the flesh" (25-27). Considering his use of Merton, perhaps the first step in breaking what Pramuk describes as a closed circle is to have "confidence in spite of darkness and risk" (30).

In Chapter 3, "Interruptions," Pramuk continues his discussion of blindness, concretely exploring the spectrum of what constitutes blindness, including fear, resentment, apathy, naiveté, ignorance and hatred (37). Pramuk's vision here further complexifies the discussion of race. This allows him to address, among other things, the politically contentious subjects of victimization and black-on-black violence, which are often gateways to deeper polarization. Pramuk raises the more serious question of whether these problems reflect a deeper crisis of the American society itself (45). For him, such tensions should not lead us to turn a blind eye to the movement of the Spirit and the subtle ways hope rises. Merton's famous Fourth and Walnut experience provides at least one example of how the grace of an eschatological vision can address our poverty of imagination (48-51).

In Chapter 4, Pramuk turns to "Crucifixions," but what he really has in mind is, again, the stimulation of our theological imaginations (54). He therefore uses Billie Holiday's rendition of "Strange Fruit" in order, as he writes, to "stand in the midst of the dead." The chapter is a deeply moving one, not only because of the sheer power of the song, but because of the profound call to express empathy and solidarity through mourn-

ing. In Pramuk's view, mourning is "crucial to any authentic Christian spirituality" (59). The chapter is also engaging because of the insight into the background of the song itself. Indeed, the discussion of the so-called redemptive nature of "Strange Fruit" and the beauty and paradox of Jesus' cross can only be described as "darkly luminous" (62). It is an apt turn of phrase.

In Chapter 5, "Silences," Pramuk takes a cautionary turn that also represents a cultural extension. It is cautionary because the author wisely recalls the Western impulse to settle and solve problems, including the tendency to engage in a type of "spiritual tourism" (71). Our rational and reductive solutions, according to Pramuk, marginalize the mystery of creation. He therefore invites readers on a journey through Chama Canyon to a small Benedictine monastery called Christ in the Desert (72). Here, Pramuk, through his own experience in silence, demonstrates how silence can be liberative and bring a type of healing and wholeness. He extends the discussion culturally, using the contributions of the Taos Indians and their relationship to the earth. Indeed, the story of Blue Lake – a body of water representing worship and communal fellowship for the Taos – becomes a testimony to a kind of reciprocity, a "symbiotic bond" between land and people, through which Pramuk weaves a message about our life out of balance. Here, the writer functions like a traditional healer coaxing us out of our utilitarian sensibilities, bidding us to return to reality (76-82).

Chapter 6, called "Streets," is more or less a return to the streets, from a bird's eye view. It has an explicit connection to the previous chapter. Although references to Merton are not as obvious in the previous chapter, it is clear that Pramuk understands the vocation of the contemplative as service to the world in a way that concurs with Merton. Listening, questioning and silence move us beyond the distractions, especially when establishing solidarity with those who experience "life in the key of black" (88-89). Pramuk, to be sure, challenges the so-called "racially unconscious white listener" to open his or her imagination. He uses the musical genius of Stevie Wonder and the prophetic spirituality of Thomas Merton, both of whom he describes as artists in their own way, to help the reader experience the streets that are "for celebration," meaning the streets represent the common life of the world where "people participate in the creation of their lives" (93). Along the journey, he discusses how Merton overcame his own reactionism to the "world" and left us all with the question of "how" we treat this other *Christi*, "this person, who happens to be black?" (98).

In Chapter 7, "Presences," he continues his exploration of the theological imagination. Here, however, the author first uses the experi-

ences of a young Jewish woman who experienced Nazi occupation. Ety Hillesum, whose journals give way to a nuanced theological sensitivity that emerges from her openness to life that pulses from a deeper place, speaks a word of hope from "God's hidden dynamism within creation" (108-10). This position is reinforced through the author's use of Melissa Raphael's insightful book entitled *The Female Face of God at Auschwitz*. Raphael captures the essence of God's power or the "word of God" as an event, a moment, and Pramuk concurs, inviting the reader to join him "in an experiment of heightened imagination" (107). Nowhere in the book is the incarnational spirituality of Ignatius of Loyola more evident than in such gestures, hints and signs of the divine seen in the face of these women, "the world's people and every natural landscape." The question we are left with is whether we are theologically free enough to surrender to such graces?

In Chapter 8, "Differences," the final chapter before inviting us to a song circle, Pramuk gives evidence of the profound disorder in society and church. He uses snapshots of reality that are often gateways to our divisions and our distortions of communal life (124-32). Moreover, he wisely avoids reducing our differences to essentialisms in race, class or culture since such an approach represents a forfeiture of the fecund imagination that Pramuk wants the reader to embrace. In sum, he prefers a more organic approach that rings, or perhaps sings, true to God's own mystery and revelation in the world (136-37). Essentialisms represent an all too facile solution to our shackled imagination, allowing distorted culture to work its spell on us. Indeed, I think he would call us to discipline our culture theologically; otherwise, the culture will discipline us, and by "us" one should understand Pramuk is referring to the church (139). It is not merely a call to dignity, but most of all, a call to the prophetic task.

I prefer thinking of the culminating Chapter 9, "Song Circles," not as a conclusion, but as a beginning. It bids us to rise songlike in the embrace of God's hidden presence (144). Indeed, Pramuk, in his own way, models openness to the stranger in his anecdotal retelling of his brief foray into Mt. Gilthead Baptist Church. Certainly, if theology is one of the greatest hindrances to a renewed theological imagination, then his call to "build" the beloved community is more than a call; it is an indictment. For Sunday morning still stands as a testimony to segregation (150). Dr. King simply stated the obvious. It is his vision of the beloved community that stands as the greatest testimony to the eschatological secret at the heart of creation. Pramuk's own "domestic church," in its own funny and distorted way, is perhaps a hint, a flash, a sign of that community, if only the Catholic Church had the theological imagination to discern that deeper meaning.

Thus, rather than viewing the family as “domestic church,” it can see the domestic church as a sign of the kingdom, for it is what “pulses beneath the surface of things” that makes way for the future (106, 157).

In spite of his profoundly Catholic sensibilities, which I sense as an understated part of his “entry points,” *Hope Sings, So Beautiful* makes a significant contribution to ecumenical theology, so much so that my own critical reservations emerge in my approbation for the book. It is the only fitting place for critique. For Christopher Pramuk’s book kindles the theological imagination and leads the way to those graced encounters for which we all crave – or shall I say groan. Indeed, the book is a call to conversation, a call to community, and a call to make a gift of ourselves in joyful acknowledgment of the grace and presence of a God whose mysterious vulnerability provides the ultimate song circle. Hope certainly sings; it sings beautifully.

Raymond Carr

FRIEDMAN, Lawrence J., *The Lives of Erich Fromm, Love’s Prophet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. xxxv + 410. ISBN 978-0-231-16258-6 (cloth) \$29.95.

“Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence” (vii). This is one of the quotations used in the preface for this authoritative and riveting biography of Erich Fromm, one of the most popular writers of the mid-twentieth century. Thomas Merton was interested in Fromm’s ideas, most of which he agreed with, although he also disagreed with some, including aspects of Fromm’s writing on spirituality. It was a relationship documented in a fascinating correspondence with Fromm that lasted over twelve years.<sup>1</sup>

Erich Fromm (1900-1980) defined himself firstly as a psychoanalyst, secondly as a political activist, thirdly as a social critic and fourthly “as a writer committed to instructing society” (ix). It is in this fourth life and through his large number of best sellers that most of us will have come across him. These best sellers include: *Escape from Freedom* (1941), *Man for Himself* (1947), *The Same Society* (1955), *The Art of Loving* (1956) and *To Have or to Be?* (1976). It is through these now classic texts that Fromm conveyed sometimes highly complex ideas from psychoanalysis, theology, politics and culture in an accessible and direct way that appealed to the zeitgeist of the 1950s through the 1970s and indeed beyond. He

reached vast numbers of readers internationally. One astonishing statistic is that *The Art of Loving* has sold more than twenty-five million copies globally, translated into thirty-two languages – a book inspired in part by Fromm’s happy third marriage and his awareness that love and tranquility within the self could facilitate “a loving environment and wide-spread personal happiness” (179). *Escape from Freedom*, exploring the social psychology of authoritarianism during the times of Hitler and Stalin, sold more than five million copies in twenty-eight languages. Interestingly, author Lawrence Friedman notes that sales on this book rose as recently as the Arab Spring of 2011. In other words it speaks still whenever and wherever dictatorial regimes are being challenged.

In this scholarly biography Friedman sets out what he describes as his “conceptual and sometimes personal dialogue with Fromm, the Renaissance man – his ideas, his ‘lives,’ and his inner conflicts” (ix). The book is structured chronologically with a prologue that lays out the case for the approach taken by Friedman. He essentially sees the inner conflicts as arising from Fromm’s sensitive humanitarianism that tended to range over the wider possibilities of life both spiritual and aesthetic alongside demands from specific aspects of the everyday. It is partly this characteristic to survey the global that has contributed to Fromm’s lack of academic recognition as a serious scholar, perhaps further exacerbated by the significance he gained in the public realm and amongst influential elected officials such as Adlai Stevenson and Eugene McCarthy. One important example of the effect of his political involvement that Friedman explores is the contribution made by Fromm through his prophetic vision for a world without war, and his influence on President John F. Kennedy during the most worrying and dangerous times of the Cold War.

Fromm’s critique of Freudian psychoanalysis and his substitution of the idea of a “social character” rather than the orthodox analytic emphasis on instinctual life and libidinal drives led to conflict and exclusion from the mainstream psychoanalytic community. Although he later set up an institute in Mexico and remained a practicing clinician for most of his working life, his specific contribution to analytic thought is often bypassed in contemporary training courses; again his thinking was not taken seriously as academically and indeed clinically mainstream.

Friedman structures the book into three parts. The first includes Fromm’s upbringing in Germany which he described as “an only child, with an anxious father and a depression-prone mother” (xxvii). One example given is of his father, who, lacking confidence in his son, feared he would not pass his dissertation and turned up at the faculty in case his son committed suicide. In fact he was awarded “very good,” and Fromm

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 305-24; subsequent references will be cited as “HGJ” parenthetically in the text.