

Here the prophetic role has broken down. We are no longer so confident that we know the way to go in these new times. We seem to be closer to the situation faced by Simone Weil as Germany—with its earlier version of ethnic cleansing—invaded France. In an apparent attempt to excuse her siding with the Resistance, Merton says that “her notion of nonviolent resistance was never fully developed. If she had survived . . . she might possibly have written some exciting things on the subject” (233). It is a measure of Merton’s stature as a prophet that we feel the same about what he might have written about post-Cold War violence and the possibility of nonviolent resistance to it.

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Thomas Merton. *The Merton Tapes: Sixth Release of Lectures*. Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1995. 8 cassettes (60 minutes each). \$8.95 per cassette.

Reviewed by Thomas Collins.

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- 1) “Belonging to God” AA 2805
- 2) “The Straight Way” AA 2801
- 3) “T. S. Eliot and Prayer” AA 2808
- 4) “Poetry and Religious Experience” AA 2804
- 5) “The Spirit of Poverty” AA 2807
- 6) “Poverty: The Vocation of Work” AA 2806
- 7) “The Thirst for God” AA 2799
- 8) “True Freedom” AA 2803

These tapes are recordings of Merton’s talks to novices at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani during the early 1960s. Recorded at the suggestion of the abbot so that the talks would be available to other monks, the tapes constitute a remarkable set of cultural artifacts that document Merton as teacher. Through these talks, insight can be gained into the monastic subculture of the time and into the mind of one of the central figures in American Catholic religious thought.

The format of the recordings presents some problems. Sessions often start with topics important for the good of the novitiate, but unrelated to the title or the subject of the tape. A good deal of the time is “off topic.” Sessions often come to an abrupt close, ending with prayer when time is up. References to topics already discussed or to be discussed in the future are frustrating to the present listener. One hopes, when all the tapes are published, that there will be some collation by topic, so that one could choose all tapes on religious vows or on prayer and the interior life or on poetry and the religious experience, for example.

“Belonging to God”: This tape records an interesting discussion about prayer for the dead, especially for those mentioned in monastic chapter. The heart of the tape is Merton’s explanation of how God’s people come together in biblical times to praise Yahweh Lord, and how they belong to him in a covenant relationship. Side two of the tape is a related lecture discussing St. Thomas’ reflections on imitating God.

“The Straight Way”: Here Merton discusses the need to find a center, to keep focused, and to try to be as independent as possible of external circumstances. Sufism is presented as similar to monastic life in that in both cases individuals are seeking a certain detachment. If one is focused enough, one is better prepared to cope with change. Side two presents similar insights from Islam, using texts from the Koran.

“T. S. Eliot and Prayer”: Merton stresses that modern poetry can give us insight into the meaning of life. Although some might link poetry with the emotional and romantic, the better modern poets offer new perspectives and challenge the reader to adopt a new angle of vision. Merton explicates this point with careful readings of several of Eliot’s poems. Both sides of the tape are on this topic.

“Poetry and the Religious Experience”: Merton begins this tape with a comment about the need for a more humanistic education for the clergy, then he demonstrates how this might be done by insightful readings of Rilke. Merton argues that the poetic experience is analogous to the religious experience. The poetic experience is an imaginative function of the intellect, creating and re-creating. The viewer or listener must contact the work of art. The religious experience is similar, but deeper. Being alive to the beauty in works of art heightens one’s sensibility and awareness. Rilke, a poet of great sensibility, re-created perceptions of reality and challenges the reader to do so. The

cultivated interior life should be a real response to real life, not just in the imaginative realm. Side two of this tape is a lecture on sanctity.

"The Spirit of Poverty": The tapes on poverty are especially interesting. While much that is discussed is from a monastic perspective, Merton puts it all in a much broader perspective. He reminds us that faith is fundamental. We need to constantly remind ourselves that without faith life is meaningless. Monastic poverty also helps keep the focus on essentials. Merton discusses things given to all monks and things for which a monk has special permission. He reminds the novices that the spirit of poverty would lead one to accept refectory food with gratitude, especially since really poor people in the world would be glad to get it. Novices who do not like their work assignment are reminded that poor people often have work that is messy and unpleasant, dull and tedious, if they have work at all. The admonition in the epistle of James that those who have an abundance in this world ought not harden their hearts against their brothers, Merton notes, applies to groups as well as to individuals.

"Poverty: The Vocation of Work": Much on this tape is unrelated to the title. There is some fascinating information about monastic bloodletting in the Middle Ages. The novices are given an admonition to avoid a worldly attitude toward culture and not to worry about keeping up with the latest novels. They should focus on more spiritual books. Experiences should be shared with the directors, not because they can offer the novice a formula to be adopted, but because the directors can be a guide as novices find their own ways. Side two begins with a discussion of the Trinity and the Incarnation. With regard to poverty, is it important to let superiors decide what is necessary, then accept their judgment. The spirit of poverty, therefore, renounces proprietorship. There should be no independent acts of ownership.

"Thirst for God": This is an elaboration on the theme that the central reason for existence is to develop a deep union of love with God. Side two, surprisingly, deals with a letter about civil rights and the death of Martin Luther King, Jr.

"True Freedom": In this talk Merton stresses that true freedom lies in asceticism. One must deepen consciousness and focus on what life is really all about. In that context asceticism is liberating, since it frees one from much that is peripheral and can lead to real purity of heart.