

Reviews

Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether. *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*. Edited by Mary Tardiff with an introduction by Rosemary Radford Ruether. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995. xix + 108 pages. Paper. \$12.95.

Reviewed by Clare Ronzani

This engaging correspondence between Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether unveils a lively exchange between Ruether, a theologian at the outset of her career, and Merton, a seasoned monk of twenty-five years. Contained in this slim volume is dialogue on a wide range of topics, including monasticism, authority, the situation of the Church in the late 1960s, and the value and meaning of the contemplative life. Merton readers will be aware that he addresses various aspects of these issues in such works as *Contemplation in a World of Action*, published a few years prior to the writing of these letters, and the perhaps lesser-known *Springs of Contemplation*, which records a retreat with a group of contemplative prioresses in 1967–68. Readers of Ruether will recognize that the questions she continues to raise regarding authority and infallibility have been with her since her earliest days as a theologian.

The correspondence covers approximately a year and a half, extending from August 1966 to February 1968. What is new in this book is Ruether's side of the correspondence; Merton's letters to her were previously published in *The Hidden Ground of Love* (William Shannon, ed., 1985). To have a record of the exchange that went on between the two provides some marvelous insights into each of them at a time when both were dealing with significant questions and were seeking one another's perspective.

Ruether, for her part, looks to Merton as one

with whom I could be ruthlessly honest about my own questions of intellectual and existential integrity. I was trying to test in this correspondence what was the crucial issue, for me, at that time: whether it was, in fact, actually possible to be a Roman Catholic and to be a person of integrity (xvi).

Merton, too, deals with questions of integrity, particularly in relation to his life as a contemplative and hermit. (The reader may recall that he had recently been involved in a relationship with a young nurse, which had no doubt deepened these questions in himself.) It is perhaps the mutual quest of each of these correspondents for a depth of integrity in their lives that makes their letters so challenging to each other and to the reader.

If, in the correspondence, Ruether is seeking to explore with Merton the crucial question of integrity within Catholicism, Merton, for his part, reveals quite directly at one point what *he* is looking for in corresponding with Ruether. He states:

It happens that you, a woman, are for some reason a theologian I trust. . . . And I do think I need the help of a theologian. Do you think you could help me once in a while? . . . I have no great project in mind. I just need help in two areas where I have serious trouble and where I have simply been avoiding a confrontation: the Bible and the Church.

The personal and interactive way in which both correspondents deal with these and other issues comprises one of the most engaging aspects of this volume. The quality of interchange between Merton and Ruether goes beyond intellectual discussion and reveals exploration on their parts, in the late 1960s, of issues that have grown in significance in subsequent decades. For readers, who, now as much as then, are struggling to live with integrity in the midst of the changing Church and world, the correspondence offers an implicit invitation to explore such questions fully and deeply, with perhaps some measure of comfort gleaned from the exchange between these two searchers.

The content and style of the letters varies. Ruether, especially, explores issues more from the point of view of the theologian. It is clear that Merton is interested in her writing and welcomes the exchange of ideas it offers. Readers may agree with Merton when he finds some of her letters "very dense and tight and solid." Yet there are splendidly candid exchanges on both their parts, and the letters lack neither wit nor wisdom.

Given the genre, and the personalities of the two correspondents, as much is communicated through the *tone* of these letters as through the content. Some readers will enjoy this book because of the insights it gives into Ruether at the beginning of her career and/or Merton toward the end of his. But more perhaps, will appreciate the lively debates and the places where they run into each other's edges as two human beings struggling for authenticity.

For Merton, the locus of the dilemma is with the role of the monk in the world. Ruether consistently challenges him to look at the question personally. What ultimately comes through is her intuition that Merton faces a significant point of change in his life. The young theologian puts it squarely to the monk:

I . . . get the strong impression . . . that you are in some period of crisis whose implications you are fighting off with long arguments. . . . The crisis I sense is not primarily to do with monasticism as an answer in general, but with *you*, with the rhythm of your personal development. You seem to me to have reached a crisis point in that development where you need a new point of view. This is a crisis, because if it is not met adequately, it will surely mean a regression to a less full existence for you, while if its meaning is properly discerned, it will be a new *kairos* leading to a new level of perception.

Ruether's sometimes relentless questioning of Merton, which she acknowledges (in the introduction) might reflect "a certain shocking style of frankness," sparks further reflection on Merton's part. Neither lets the other "off the hook," and their tone is often one of lively sparring. An example of this is their difference of opinion regarding the value of monastic life in the contemporary era. Ruether makes it clear that "I am radically out of sympathy with the monastic project." She confronts Merton: "You say that you have no trouble with your vocation, but, if that is really true, maybe you should be having some trouble with your vocation." Merton, in his turn, accuses Ruether of being "a very academic, cerebral, abstract type," to which she replies, "If I weren't a woman would it have occurred to you to accuse me of being cerebral? Interesting resentment there."

As critical as Ruether becomes, Merton takes her critiques seriously and responds by letting her know that he has given her ideas further thought. Ruether: "Do you realize how defensive you are, forever proving, proving, how good your life is, etc. . . . you seem too

threatened at the moment to discuss . . . objectively." Merton: "I am really very grateful for your last letter . . . and I am sorry for being such a creep, but it is true that you did make me feel very defensive. . . . So don't give up on me, I will be objective."

Despite their sometimes turbulent character, these letters ultimately reveal an attitude of equality on the part of both Merton and Ruether. In her introduction, Ruether states:

Merton from the beginning addressed me as an equal. (This did not surprise me at the time, since I saw myself as an equal, but it is more impressive in retrospect.) . . . Never did he take the paternalistic stance as the father addressing the child, which is more typical of the cleric, especially in relation to women.

This attitude of respect for those with whom he corresponds is wonderfully evident in other letters as well, as those who have delved into other volumes of Merton's correspondence will recognize.

One final note: the actual correspondence between Ruether and Merton is enhanced by the introductory and concluding sections of the book. Mary Tardiff's preface provides valuable background information, especially in regard to Ruether, as does Christine Bochen's afterword in regard to Merton. And Ruether's introduction adds very helpful contextual information. One image she offers is especially revealing as she states candidly:

I see Thomas Merton and myself somewhat like two ships that happened to pass each other on our respective journeys. For a brief moment we turned our search lights on each other with blazing intensity. Then, when we sensed that we were indeed going in different directions, we began to pass each other by.

Readers will be grateful for the passing of these two ships.

Thomas Merton. *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*. Edited and with an introduction by William H. Shannon. New York: Crossroads, 1995. 338 pages with index. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Richard D. Parry

This book is a collection of essays written by Thomas Merton between 1961 and 1968. They cover the major social issues of the day—