

Reviews*

MERTON, Thomas. *Cold War Letters*, eds. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon. Foreword by James W. Douglass (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), pp. xxxiv + 206. ISBN 13: 978-1-57075-662-7 (paperback). \$16.00.

The appearance of this volume more than forty years after Merton wrote the letters requires some explanation. During the year October 1961–October 1962 Merton wrote a number of articles and a book manuscript in which he spoke out against war and for peace.

* Editor's Note:

These sixteen reviews divide into four categories. The first category consists of three texts by Thomas Merton:

- 1) *Cold War Letters*
- 2) *Signs of Peace*
- 3) *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition Pre-Benedictine Monasticism*

The second category consists of texts about Merton:

- 1) *Merton and Friends: A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax, and Edward Rice*
- 2) *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton*

The third category emphasizes the importance of community as a conduit of faith development:

- 1) *Creating a Human World: A New Psychological and Religious Anthropology in Dialogue with Freud, Heidegger and Kierkegaard*
- 2) *Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View*
- 3) *We Walk the Path Together: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh & Meister Eckhart*
- 4) *Contemplation in Action*
- 5) *Great Mystics & Social Justice, Walking on the Two Feet of Love*

The final category focuses on spiritual direction and culture:

- 1) *Transforming Heart and Mind: Learning from the Mystic*
- 2) *Chanting the Psalms: A Practical Guide with Instructional CD*
- 3) *A Monk's Alphabet: Moments of Stillness in a Turning World*
- 4) *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path*
- 5) *Waking Up to What You Do: A Zen Practice for Meeting Every Situation with Intelligence and Compassion*
- 6) *Portraits of Grace, Images and Words from the Monastery of the Holy Spirit*

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Merton's awakening to a prophetic vocation of prayer and writing for the abolition of war and creation of cultures of peace arose from his vocation as monk and writer. Grounded in a deep appreciation of God's presence within him and all persons, Merton believed that his faith could not serve "merely as a happiness pill. It has to be the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ" (#3, p. 13).

By April 1962, Merton's superiors forbade him to publish on the subject of war. In obedience, he took up other writing projects; as a result, the book did not appear in his lifetime.¹ However, Merton recognized that the threat humanity faced required that he continue to work for the abolition of war as a monk and writer. He prayed. He published a few articles under pseudonyms or in obscure publications. He wrote letters to his wide circle of friends and contacts and then selected, had mimeographed and disseminated forty-nine Cold War Letters in April 1962, increased to a total of one hundred and eleven in January 1963, marked, "strictly confidential. Not for publication." This allowed Merton both to comply with the ban, and to be heard in relation to war and peace.²

What did Merton want to say to his correspondents? In her introduction, Christine Bochen summarizes his message: "Simply put war is the most critical issue of our day and we need, with all the resources available to us, to work to abolish war and build peace" (p. xxvi). In Merton's words, "The issue is too serious. This is purely and simply the crucifixion over again. Those who think there can be a just cause for measures that gravely risk leading to the destruction of the entire human race are in the most dangerous illusion, and if they are Christian they are purely and simply arming themselves with hammer and nails to crucify and deny Christ" (#1, p. 10).

Living physically apart from the world, Merton urged those "in the world" to understand the forces producing a "Cold War mentality," notably propaganda and technology. He urged correspondents not succumb to a "progressive deadening of conscience" (#19, p. 48) but rather to live more simply (#12, p. 33) and to seek an inner transformation (#25, p. 59).

Believing that there is that of God in every person, Merton supported peaceful exchanges with the so-called enemy and even sought some way to participate in a "peace hostage exchange" (#111, p. 193). He encouraged "non-violent and civil-disobedience movements" but warned that such movements must be disciplined rather than a form of rebellious "beatnik nonconformism" (#52, p. 106).

A generation of peace activists inspired by Merton in the sixties widened the scope of Christian non-violence. Does Merton have anything to say today? Crucially, Merton reminds us that when atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the problem of seeking and keeping world peace ceased to be a social concern among many; it became the dominant problem not simply for Merton (who penned some of these letters amidst the Cuban missile crisis) and his generation, but also for ours. Failure to solve it means the end of seekers and solutions. Britain, China, France, India, Israel, Pakistan, Russia and the United States possess arsenals of nuclear weapons. North Korea, Iran and others may join the nuclear club. There are other dangers: highly carcinogenic plutonium is a health risk; enriched uranium may become accessible to nuclear terrorists.

Readers today may draw wisdom from Merton's faith, trusting God not to make us infallible but to protect us from serious error. As Merton counseled, let us listen to God and try to avoid illusions about the nature of "this great moral and spiritual challenge" (#90, p. 161). Though these letters have previously been accessible in the five volumes of Merton's letters, under the general editorship of William H. Shannon, reading this book tells us what politicians, the media and others do not (#88, p. 155). Along with the suppressed book and anthologies of Merton's social essays,³ it is a great benefit to have the letters in a single volume, with an appendix providing biographical information about the original recipients of the *Cold War Letters*.

Merton's message to readers still governed by those who can annihilate the enemy remains remarkably relevant. I trust that publication of this collection will inspire desperately needed witness against war and for peace.

Notes

1 Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004).

2 Thirty-five letters, most of them from *Cold War Letters*, were included in Part III, "Letters in a Time of Crisis," in *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1964), pp. 237-328.

3 Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

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