

## Reviews

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MERTON, Thomas, *The Life of the Vows: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 6, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell, Preface by Augustine Roberts, OCSO, Monastic Wisdom, vol. 30 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012), pp. lxxxi + 604. ISBN 978-0-87907-030-4 (paper) \$44.95.

From October, 1955 until April, 1965 Thomas Merton gave weekly conferences to Gethsemani's young monks on the Benedictine vows of obedience, stability and conversion of life. With clarity and gentle exactitude, Merton scholar Patrick O'Connell has edited this work not only of monastic interest, but, since Merton thought that "The ultimate purpose of the vows . . . is to be understood as the restoration of one's authentic identity as made in the divine image and the unconditional gift of this true self to its Creator" (liii) and that "the essence of the vows is not restriction but liberation" (lv), of general interest to serious Christians as well. Vows deal with the "struggle against the habits of the world, the vices, the passions and everything that can draw us away from God, and a life of continual effort to acquire virtues" (279). These are struggles we all face.

These conferences are among Merton's most systematic theological works. The "Index of Contents" (3-6) illustrates their careful organization. Part I (7-105) introduces "the basic principles of Christian theology about man and his striving for his last end" (7). Merton closely follows the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas in this most dense writing in the book. Part II (105-51) treats the "States of Life: The State of Perfection." It begins with the assertion "that man's life should be nothing else but a friendship with God, a communion in the divine nature, a divinization by grace" (105). Here Merton's thought seems especially pre-Vatican II in its treatment of religious life as the most perfect choice; religious are "objects of a special love and election on the part of God" (105). I suspect I will not be the only reader who finds this "monastic triumphalism" (see, for example, the conclusions on page 127) a bit tiresome. In any case, in Parts I and II Merton lays the theological foundations for what follows and is the heart of the book.

Part III (151-234) is a general treatment of vows, understood less as a "juridical act of profession" than as an interior conversion (151) embracing renunciation of the former life and imitation of Christ, incorporation into

a society of love, the religious family and consecration to God by vows (152). Part IV (234-480), which Merton calls “the most important part of our study” (234), illustrates how this is worked out in the Benedictine vows of obedience (“the *most important of the vows*” because it “establishes us in a stable condition in the religious state” [237]), conversion of manners (which includes chastity and poverty treated in separate subsections) and stability, which Merton describes as “essentially simple and uncomplicated” (447). For each vow, Merton provides general principles, theological (again relying on St. Thomas) and biblical foundations, and practical material on keeping the vow. (Current readers may find details of which failures to keep a vow are sin, and of the sins which are mortal or venial, dated and off-putting.) While “the vow of obedience is the most important . . . from the point of view of *discipline*,” Merton thinks that “the vow of conversion of manners . . . *is what really makes the monk*” (295).

I encourage the general reader not to be put off by the book’s subject or size. Its careful outline indicates where one can dip in for material of personal interest (though page numbers in the outline do not always correspond exactly to page numbers in the text). Of practical general interest is Merton’s distinction between servility and obedience (271). His long treatment of conversion of manners (274-447) is of interest both to monastics and lay Christians, and the theologically grounded monastic understanding of sexuality provides both balance and welcome relief from the attitudes of a sex-crazed society. Merton well knew that the vow of poverty “is especially crucial today, in America” (380). His discussion of that vow may have the most radical implications of any of the conferences. This collection is the most complete summary of Merton’s thought on the purpose of monasticism as it is practically expressed in its vows. If like Merton’s correspondent Rosemary Radford Ruether, one questions monasticism’s “relevance,”<sup>1</sup> his scathing analysis of contemporary society (7-9) and presentation of monasticism’s alternative “way” provides ample justification.

O’Connell’s long introduction (xiii-lxxxii) is an excellent overview of Merton’s thinking about monasticism, the subject that led to some of the monk’s most scholarly and careful writing. (Appendix C [549] lists Merton’s other books on monasticism.) O’Connell’s evaluative summary of Merton’s writing on monasticism (lii-lxxiv) is especially fine. The introduction also highlights a number of Merton’s later themes that are first articulated here, provides both the sources of Merton’s teachings and their limitations (see for example pages xx, xxviii, xxxii) and compares

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1. See 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).

the development of his ideas over a period of years (see for example pages xlvi, li). I found O'Connell's insights into Merton's texts, its editions and the editing process fascinating reading. His exactitude is evident in the editing itself and in Appendices A and B (the textual notes and the table of correspondences with Merton's taped conferences). His immense learning is humbly hidden in the extensive and illuminating footnotes. This is exactly the sort of work we expect of O'Connell, to whom Merton scholars and readers owe a great debt of gratitude for bringing Merton's monastic conferences into print.

This is a book of conferences given by one who loved monastic life (I leave evaluation of his own observance of it to others) and edited by one who understands its author and his subject. While perhaps not the easiest introduction to Merton's monastic thought, it is one of the most comprehensive and engaging, and comes highly recommended for its contents and their implication for both monks and serious Christians. Because, as Merton wrote, they "are to enable us to *be* someone, not to do something" (9), monastic vows turn western society's quest for money, sex and power on its head. And at least some of us think that is exactly where such a quest belongs.

Bonnie Bowman Thurston

MERTON, Thomas, *On Christian Contemplation*, edited with a Preface by Paul M. Pearson (New York: New Directions, 2012), pp. xiv + 82. ISBN 978-0-8112-1996-9 (paper) \$13.95.

MERTON, Thomas, *On Eastern Meditation*, edited with an Introduction by Bonnie Thurston (New York: New Directions, 2012), pp. xviii + 76. ISBN 978-0-8112-1994-5 (paper) \$13.95.

"Honestly I do not think it matters a bit  
whether one can sit cross-legged or not."

In this strange new world in which even the pope has an account on the online social network Twitter, I wondered, "Would Merton tweet?" and if so, "What would Merton tweet?" This line from *On Eastern Meditation* (59) would meet the standard of brevity required by Twitter's 140-character limit on messages. Though the above passage is the complete selection, it is one of the shorter ones from this volume. Still, most quotations from *On Eastern Meditation* are a few sentences or shorter. Knowing this, and seeing another volume of the same size and look from the same publisher, one might expect the same format inside *On Christian Contemplation*. This is not the case. Both volumes are well-chosen selections of Merton's