

EASTERN EXPOSURE

Review of
THOMAS MERTON AND ASIA: HIS QUEST FOR UTOPIA
by Alexander Lipski

— Reviewed by **Chalmers MacCormick**

This short study has a double aspect — it is both descriptive and critical — and therefore is to be assessed according to two sets of criteria.

First, in four chapters Lipski describes Merton's overall encounter with Asia and Asian spirituality, beginning with his fledgling inquiries into oriental mysticism in 1937 (thanks to Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*), his becoming acquainted with the Hindu monk Brahmachari in 1938, and, after an apparently quiescent phase during his early years at Gethsemani, his reawakening to Asia in 1949 — in a somewhat happenstance way initially, then in a systematic manner from 1961 till his death in 1968. During this final phase, Asia was "his major concern."

As description, the book is most conspicuous for its virtues. It is accurate, clearly and engagingly written, and comprehensive. As such, it is especially well-suited to general readers seeking an introduction to the subject.

Additionally, the book should appeal to more specialized readers. One section in particular does this — the chapter on "Merton and Hinduism," which addresses an area relatively neglected in previous works. Here we have Lipski's most distinctive and valuable contribution. The presentation is focused, well informed, and aptly documented from both published and unpublished sources. My one reservation (fairly minor) concerns the length. Lipski's preface leads us to expect that the matter will be "analyzed in depth," but this is simply not possible in nineteen pages. Even so, the chapter is undeniably important as basic description.

The book is engaging too, though less successfully, as an exercise in criticism. Lipski's main contention is that Merton was so utopian and idealistic that his view of Asian reality was seriously blurred. Joined to this over-idealization was a persistent disparagement of modern western civilization, whose global influence had come to contaminate and corrupt the non-western societies. Thus, what Merton saw as good in Asia was what was native to it, whereas what was corrupt, or corrupting, were encroachments and viral infections from the West.

As Lipski sketches it, Merton's utopianism began early and persisted through his adult life, right up to the day of this death (witness his Bangkok talk). We see it already when, at age seventeen, he embraced "the simplistic slogans and solutions of Marxism." We see it again in his extolling of yogic contemplation as a practicable means of overcoming racial, social, religious, national, and international conflict — in spite of the fact that, though "contemplation was undoubtedly highly valued in ancient India, it had not produced a harmonious, peaceful society," but rather had co-existed (compartmentally) alongside

Chalmers MacCormick received his Ph.D. in History and Philosophy of Religion at Harvard University. For the past twenty-five years he has been Professor of Religion at Wells College in Aurora, New York. He will teach a seminar on Thomas Merton and the mystics who most influenced him in the Fall of 1984. He is the author of the notable essay, "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (Fall 1972): 802-818, as well as "A Critical View of Solitude in Merton's Life and Thought" in *The Message of Thomas Merton* (1981): 115-128.

major political aggrandizement and military conquest. Once more, we see it in his allowing his idealization of Confucian humanism to blind him to the Machiavellian ruthlessness that frequently prevailed in ancient China. And we see it in his disregard of the close connection between Japanese Zen and the warrior class (*samurai*): hence, “no confrontation with reality could shake his faith in the efficacy of Zen.”

These are but a few of the numerous instances Lipski marshalls as evidence.

What are we to make of this seeming indictment? In answer, four chief observations are called for here, it seems to me.

First, the thesis is certainly plausible; indeed, on the face of it, it is probable: Merton’s own statements attest to it. Thus, basking in the memory of his visits to the Hindu monuments at Mahabalipuram, India, and to the Buddhist ones at Polonnaruwa, Ceylon, less than two weeks before his death, he notes in his journal that there his Asian pilgrimage had (as excerpted by Lipski) “come clear and purified itself. I mean, I don’t know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface. . . . This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian or European or American, and it is clear, pure and complete. . . .”

Second, the *degree* to which the thesis is plausible or provable still remains to be seen. The book elaborates a suggestion, but does not provide a sufficient demonstration. It is simply too brief for that. My own impression is that the thesis is exaggerated. While Lipski may not overstate Merton’s idealism, he does, in my judgment, overstate his want of realism. Even so, the exaggeration is not without value, for it should stimulate reflection, discussion, and further analysis among students of Merton’s life and thought. In short, though apparently not foolproof, Lipski’s thesis might well be fruitful.

Third, Merton’s idealism served him well. If he was naive, his naivete may be viewed as a supernatural necessity — a special grace, one by which his having blind spots aided him to gain (and to share) insight. Merton’s “utopianism” thus contributed directly and positively to his growth, as Lipski himself notes in a — to my mind — singularly pivotal statement. Writing about Merton’s special attraction to Chuang Tzu, he comments:

Had Merton admitted that ancient Chinese society and, for that matter, all societies past and present, exhibited those features which he condemned in his own western society, he would have doomed the utopian expectations which sustained the momentum and enthusiasm of his quest. To protect his cherished hopes, he had to overlook unpleasant reality.

This leads us to a fourth, final observation:

Despite the seemingly negative tenor of Lipski’s thesis, his estimate of Merton and Merton’s relationship to Asia is ultimately positive. Lipski is at base neither a debunker nor a detractor, but rather an admirer. That he appreciates the substantial value that exposure to the East had for Merton is evident throughout — and nowhere more so than in his simply stated, yet eloquent concluding sentences: “It was Asia that bestowed, at least in part, the gift of self-understanding upon Thomas Merton. In return he presented the best of Asia to the West.”



ALEXANDER LIPSKI