

# NEW PHASE OF MERTON STUDIES

Review of

*Letters from Tom*

A Selection of Letters from Father Thomas Merton,  
Monk of Gethsemani, to W. H. Ferry, 1961-1968  
Chosen and Edited by W. H. Ferry

— Reviewed by **George A. Kilcourse**

We are gradually but unmistakably moving into a new phase of Merton studies.

W. H. "Ping" Ferry's collection of Thomas Merton's letters signals a retrieval of the more intimate encounter with Merton. Occasionally, hints of the personable, satiric, and candid figure have seeped through the pages of commentary and analysis. Biographers Monica Furlong, James Forest, Edward Rice, and Anthony Padovano best direct us toward the transition with what Merton himself exposed in the published journals and especially his later poetry. (With *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton relaxed and freely teased readers; in these letters he dubs *The Geography of Lograire* "my summa of offbeat anthropology.")

This "sampler," as Ferry describes a selection of his correspondence from Merton, rivals *A Catch of Anti-Letters* between Merton and Robert Lax for blunt expression. For example, commenting on the celebrated case of Charles Davis leaving the priesthood, Merton thunders: "As far as I can see, his points are unassailable. Authority has simply been abused too long in the Catholic Church and for many people it just becomes utterly stupid and intolerable to have to put up with the kind of jackassing around that is imposed in God's name. It is an insult to God Himself and in the end it can only discredit all idea of authority and obedience. There comes a point where they simply forfeit the right to be listened to."

War and Peace, the Black revolution, and Roman Catholic Church reforms preoccupy Merton in these letters before he turns to his rendezvous with Ferry in California, en route to Asia. "He challenged the tortured opinions of the Catholic establishment on these issues in vivid terms," writes Ferry introducing the correspondence. The ensuing censure and censoring become an aggravation from which Merton ultimately declares vindication in these pages.

One reads these letters with the engaging sense of poring over columns of tomorrow's edition of *The New York Times*. The prophetic tenor of Merton's voice magnifies with the



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passage of time. In an early letter (Sept. 18, 1961) Merton diagnoses “our deep rooted addiction to the kind of narcotic thinking induced by mass media.” His monastic role repeatedly works its therapy. In the wake of Cold War prejudgements, he ventures “the immense pioneering job of thinking that is demanded.”

Merton is seldom so pointed in engaging the ethical question as with the specific correspondent whose work at Santa Barbara’s Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions attracted his attention. He lamented that “most of us are not regarding it [war and peace] as a moral issue at all.” In the face of Catholic moralists who argued justifying preemptive first strikes, Merton complained. “The professionals in the game have certainly distorted Christianity beyond recognition,” he surmised. The American Bishops’ pastoral on Peace of a year ago invites a serious reading from the vantage of what Merton confesses as “my more extreme position.” He dissociated himself from the “suave surface” of moral arguments about “limited nuclear war.”

While exclaiming in these letters, “I know nothing about politics,” Merton challenges some of the canons of what Moral Majority and even moderate Catholic political activists presuppose. On the question of economic life, he anticipated another neuralgic question the American Bishops are approaching currently with even greater delicacy (“Like a land mine!” Merton would volunteer). “I refuse to equate hope in God with an unbounded trust in our economic situation,” he offers. When we get around to chiseling Merton quotations into buildings will those who claim to be unmistakably Catholic promote Merton’s indictment of our capitalistic ethic by memorializing words like these? “To simply suppose that everything works along automatically and nicely and that it is just a question of sweetly adjusting individual greeds together so that they form a composite bliss of fulfillment, is what has got us where we are, and is leading us to the final splendid flash,” Merton scolds.

Merton’s habitual reticence about criticism of the Church and authority dissolves these letters. “The top brass in the American hierarchy,” he notes, express displeasure on his peace writings. His reading of the curial powers in Rome usurping the powers of the pope leads to the verdict that infallibility has lost its charism quality. “What happens to guys down the line?” Merton ponders. “Do they suddenly acquire rather frightening obligations to dissent? There is going to be quite a crisis one of these days,” he forecasts. This 1964 offering almost anticipated the 1968 encyclical, *Humane Vitae*, and its aftermath.

Those who have attempted to domesticate Merton in the image of a celebrated but harmless hermit who happened to be a prolific and gifted writer are due a surprise with the epistles of Thomas Merton. Ferry humbly and forthrightly locates his “tiny” volume beside the monumental project of the *Collected Letters* which Msgr. William H. Shannon has begun to edit. There we can expect carefully annotated references to many allusions which remain cryptic in Ferry’s seventy-three pages. It is this contextualizing of Merton’s correspondence that affords an extraordinary new moment in the Merton scholarly industry. Revisions of the Merton profile will follow throughout another generation.

Finally, despite this reviewer’s appreciation of Ferry’s contribution, I caution readers. Here I come full circle to my identifying the transition to a new phase of Merton studies.

Voyeurs abound! Many are tempted to be distracted from the essential Merton in his already available, classic published works. “The man” becomes a decoy. The message and vision get garbled. With the rush to popularize “Merton studies” in classrooms, PBS telecasting, and commercialized Merton paraphernalia, there is a hazard of immature attention and pre-occupation with a peripheral Merton.

Ferry’s volume is virtually unavailable because it was published as a limited edition of five hundred copies distributed to friends. As part of the later Shannon edition, however, we can expect to re-discover this part of a larger whole. Then we will begin to see just as Merton images in the final line of his last letter from this collection — “no masks that hide anything anymore.”