

A TESTIMONY OF CONFIDENCE AND FRIENDSHIP

Review of

THE HIDDEN GROUND OF LOVE:

The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns
Selected & Edited by William H. Shannon

—Reviewed by **Elena Malits, C.S.C.**

On finishing the first volume of Thomas Merton's collected letters (three more are projected), one suspects that the pages of his complete correspondence well might circle seven times that mythic mountain the monk's name conjures up! Given the monastic discipline, his responsibilities within the monastery, and Merton's never-ending publication commitments, the sheer quantity of his letters is staggering. In *The Hidden Ground of Love* we meet a harried man under multiple pressures; he is forever apologizing for lack of time and mounting demands. Yet these letters never appear perfunctory. They are, rather, the spontaneous outpourings of someone who not only loves to engage in sustained dialogue, but who *must* do it for his own sanity, intellectual development, and spiritual growth. While Merton had many people come to visit him at Gethsemani, he was still relatively limited in his opportunities for serious conversation, so letter writing had to serve Thomas Merton's real need for personal communication.

For this first volume in the series, William Shannon has selected those letters concerned with religious experience and social concerns. All of Merton's writings are difficult to categorize—and his letters all the more so—but *The Hidden Ground of Love* possesses a certain unity and coherence. These letters recurrently exhibit Merton's passion for probing the minds and hearts of religious persons from different traditions; his anguish over racial injustices in the 1960's; his near despair at the nuclear buildup and the indifference of Christians to its moral implications. The letters disclose not only a man with an incredible range of interests, but also one who can go right to the heart of the issue of importance to both correspondents.

In these letters we meet Thomas Merton in many moods. Often he is angry or sarcastic about the Abbot who keeps tight reins on him. Even more he complains about the Order's censors who forbid him to publish on issues of war and peace because they view that as unseemly for a monk.

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With typical wry humor, Merton tells Jim Forest of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, “I wrote to the Abbot General and said it is a good thing Pope John didn’t have to get his encyclical through our censors.” And then there is the Merton who enters so movingly into the suffering of three widows whose assassinated husbands the monk admired: Jacqueline Kennedy, Ethel Kennedy, and Corretta Scott King. Many of the letters show us Merton daydreaming on paper about places he would like to go for more solitude or more significant conversation. Always he is telling his correspondents what he is reading, thinking about, and praying for in relation to the events in his own life and those of the world.

To a young black singer disheartened by attempts to raise money for African scholarships, Merton offers his own way of dealing with distressing events: “And let’s hope this sad business will show us that we are both above the hazards and accidents that often try us all so sorely. We are bigger than the events that bug us! I know you are and I hope that I am too . . . I’ll always be your friend.” Indeed, Thomas Merton’s instinct for surmounting crushing events is rooted in his appreciation for friendship. His letters are essentially letters to men and women who are or will become friends through the mutual effort to articulate their common bonds of experience. Even when Merton initiates a correspondence (as he frequently does) with somebody whose book he has just read, he approaches that person already as a friend who has shown him a new way of looking at the world. Merton takes his reading as an invitation to dialogue, and offers the author his own vision of things in return.

The friends Merton talks to in these letters represent a remarkable assortment of religious people: Anglicans, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, Orthodox, assorted Protestants, Sufis, Taoists, and Zen masters. There are well known Catholic figures such as Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, Dom Heider Camara, Dorothy Day, Catherine de Hueck Doherty, Karl Rahner. There are those in the front lines of the peace movement or civil rights struggle like the Berrigan brothers, Jim Douglass, and Gordon Zahn. Merton’s letters to the seventy-eight individuals included in *The Hidden Ground of Love* reveal his sense of the mystery present in so many different kinds of persons and in so many different paths to God. His own quest for unity is rooted in what he calls, in a letter to Amiya Chakravarty, “that hidden ground of love for which there can be no explanation.”

Of course, Thomas Merton’s letters provide us with insights into the man not available in his published writings. For instance, in an answer to a Sufi mystic’s question about how he meditates, Merton gives Abdul Aziz a description of his personal prayer—something he never talks about in all his books on prayer. “I do not ordinarily write about such things” he tells his Sufi friend, “and I ask you therefore to be discreet about it. But I write this as a testimony of confidence and friendship.” Anyone interested in Thomas Merton can only delight in being in on such privileged disclosures.

Yet in a peculiar way, the precious moments of insight into Merton seem submerged in too many relationships, too much content, too many works. *The Hidden Ground of Love* arranges Merton’s letters alphabetically according to correspondents, and then chronologically within each set. Shannon remarks in the introduction that “each set of Merton’s letters . . . is a partial biography of Thomas Merton, and all the sets taken together are a kind of latter-day *Seven Storey Mountain*.” True enough. But one can only wonder how many biographies or how large an autobiography of anyone a reader, even an inveterate fan, could want? There is so much repetition in this collection that the reader gets worn down and loses perspective.

For all the power of personal letters to reveal the man, too many of them come off as sketches of ideas Merton formulates better in the published works. While rejoicing in the availability of the Merton letters, a more stringent editorial choice might better serve both Merton and his readers.