

# THE CENTER DIALOGUE

Review of

Thomas Merton

*PREVIEW OF THE ASIAN JOURNEY*

New York: Crossroad, 1989

114 pages / \$13.95 hardcover

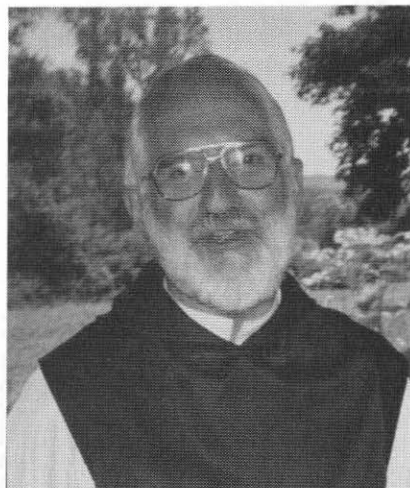
Reviewed by **Patrick Hart**, O.C.S.O.

The importance of this small volume lies chiefly in the talk by Thomas Merton to a rather distinguished audience at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, and the stimulating dialogue that ensued. The fact that these recorded words were nearly the last Merton uttered before embarking on his Asian journey makes them even more poignant. He covered a great variety of subjects during his rather brief presentation, with a generous sprinkling of humor throughout. He commented, first of all, on his traveling outside the monastery, emphasizing that Dom James Fox had not favored monks traveling, but with the new abbot, Flavian Burns, he felt freer to travel. Incidentally here the editor's comment in brackets distorts the true meaning of Merton's words. Merton had said that Dom James' first act as hermit following his resignation as abbot was to attend Robert Kennedy's funeral in New York. But the editor put "[the new abbot]" in parenthesis which changes Merton's meaning and credits Abbot Flavian with attending Kennedy's funeral.

As I said above, the great value of this little book is that it records Merton's own words accurately before he left on a journey which would be his last, and thus reflects his mature thinking on a range of subjects from his interest in Asian religions to monastic renewal, from mysticism in the East and West to the prophetic witness of the Church. He had some rather critical things to say about the institution of the Church and religious life, although the complete text of his talk helps clarify a number of rumors that were circulated following his death where short excerpts of his remarks were reported out of context and appeared even more radical than they actually were.

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Photo by Arthur W. "Bill" Biddle

The book opens with a fine twenty-seven page “Introduction” by Walter Capps, which situates the “Center Dialogue” in proper perspective. He points out that Merton’s interest in the East was reflected in several of his books, including, first of all, *Mystics and Zen Masters* and finally in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, which had been published only a few weeks prior to his appearance at the Center. I am in complete agreement with Capps in his evaluation of the latter volume: “*Zen and the Birds of Appetite* constitutes some of Merton’s most perceptive thinking and clearest writing. In my judgment, it shows him at his best — yes — at the top of his form.” I would add here that I think Merton would agree to that assessment, especially for “The New Consciousness” and the dialogue between Merton and Suzuki.

Robert Hutchins, President of the Center, had asked Wilbur H. (“Ping”) Ferry to introduce Merton, which he did in a few words, quoting from the blurb on the jacket of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, jokingly attributing the blurb to Merton himself! After Merton’s own talk, questions were raised by most of the participants, including Donald McDonald, editor of *The Center Magazine*; Frank K. Kelly, former speech writer for President Harry S. Truman and an officer of the Fund for the Republic; Bishop James Pike, a member of the staff of the Center since 1966 who died in a tragic accident in the Near East shortly after this gathering; and John Cogley, religious editor of *The New York Times* before he came to the Center. The questions were probing and challenging for Merton, as well as wide-ranging, but in the end they all focused on the essential issues of solitude versus community, of individual transformation of consciousness and a more universal consciousness. Merton’s final words, I believe, sum up his position: “But I think we must all get to the point of being universal persons. And in whatever way we go about it, we’re not going to solve our problems unless we are all more and more thoroughly universal, and this is catholic . . . catholic people” (p. 70).

If I could register a complaint at all, it would be the editorial decision to include two articles by Merton on Native Americans that appeared in *The Center Magazine*. I personally felt these essays were not closely enough related to the “Center Dialogue” to be included here. Besides, in addition to their appearance in magazine form, Unicorn Press brought them out in a volume of Merton’s articles on Native Americans, titled *Ishi Means Man*, which is still in print. Their presence here certainly helps to bulk out the book, but in doing so, gives the impression of having been included mainly for this reason.

What I should like to have seen following the “Center Dialogue” would have been comments from the surviving participants of the discussion, especially “Ping” Ferry who had arranged for Merton’s appearance, and who had acted as host along with his wife during Merton’s visit to the West Coast prior to his departure for the Far East.<sup>1</sup> But these are relatively minor reservations on a welcome volume, which should be of interest to all Merton readers today.

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1. See Ferry’s “Notes on Walter Capps’ *Preview of the Asian Journey*,” which were published in *The Merton Seasonal* 15 (Winter 1990): no. 1, pp. 26-28.