

TWO VIEWS OF THE SIXTH MERTON ANNUAL

Reviews of
THE MERTON ANNUAL 6
 Edited by George A. Kilcourse
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I. A CORNUCOPIA OF MERTON, BY **Lawrence S. Cunningham**

The diversity in this volume defies easy classification but, at the risk of oversimplification, let me attempt some descriptive categories.

First, material(s) dealing with Merton's life. We have a very nice selection of letters from the noted Quaker thinker Douglas V. Steere to Thomas Merton. The correspondence is of special interest because of Steere's reporting on his attendance at the Second Vatican Council where he was an invited observer. This correspondence (it also includes a few letters from Merton to Steere) is prefaced by a longish **aide memoire** Steere drew up after his first visit to Gethsemani (engineered by John Heidbrink of the Fellowship of Reconciliation). This fraternal exchange is beautifully contextualized by Glenn Hinson's essay on Steere in this volume. Secondly, George Kilcourse reprints an interview he had with Jack Ford (emeritus professor from Bellarmine College) about the latter's friendship with Merton and, more poignantly, Ford's somewhat melancholy recollections of Dan Walsh. Finally, in this category, I would mention Roger Corless's account of the Merton-Suzuki relationship both for its own sake and, more importantly, for Corless's understanding of what presuppositions Suzuki brought to the conversation. I would make that essay required reading for anyone tempted to enter into facile "encounters" with a world as alien to Western sensibilities as Zen. The Corless essay is not only a nice piece of biographical research but a tough minded cautionary piece tale about the difficulties attendant upon interreligious dialogue.

Secondly, this volume prints a number of perceptive essays deriving from the Abbey Center meeting held at Gethsemani in October 1992. We have the summary report/reflection of the meetings and its participants from the Francis Kline as well as perceptive follow-up reflections from the main participants, Rosemary Haughton and Rembert Weakland. These contributions give fair judgment about the enfleshment of Merton's desire for conversation about crucial issues in a monastic context.

In January 1993, the Abbey Center held a "scholar's retreat." Glenn Hinson's paper mentioned above was presented at that meeting as well as other essays which appear in this volume. Robert Goizueta presented a fine reflection on the topic of theological aesthetics geared to his acknowledged expertise in Hispanic theology. Katherine DePas wrote a perceptive essay on the spirituality of mercy with an eye to the Cistercian writer, Aelred of Rievaulx (with special reference to Aelred's classic treatise on spiritual friendship). Tina Pippin did a fine postmodern reflection on apocalyptic spirituality. I would especially single out Stephen Payne's wonderful essay on postmodernism for its sensitivity to that vexatious term and Payne's own deep encounter with Sanjuanista literature. As a Carmelite friar and trained philosopher, he wrote sensitively on spirituality and contemporary culture. All of the essays reflected the expressed desire of Michael Downey (in his "roundup" of

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Mertoniana in this volume) that those interested in Merton move the discussion forward to reflect on issues cognate to those of Merton himself. These essays prove that it can be done.

Thirdly, and finally, the volume ends with reviews of recent volumes on Merton as well as a review of the recent poetry/prose of Denise Levertov who, as Jack Ford recalled in the interview printed in this volume, was a visitor to Merton in the 1960s.

After having read the contributions in this sixth volume, but in no particular order, I asked myself whether there was any thematic unity to the collection. What I discovered and tried to indicate above is that there are still things to learn about the life and activities of Thomas Merton along with a decided feeling that those who find inspiration in him need to “move on” to those topics which he engaged so seriously.

Merton himself once wrote that he refused to become a stereotype, derived from a simple reading of **The Seven Storey Mountain**, foisted on parochial school children. By the same token we cannot enshrine the Merton of the 1960s as the final locus of study and reflection. Like every classic figure he is explicable both in his own terms of vocabulary, culture, and time but his final importance is to be found in the hints and emphases that he gives us for our times. My judgment is that the authors who have contributed to this volume understand that dialectic and desire, as do the editors of **The Merton Annual** themselves, to move our reflections to a new level of discourse.

II. “MERTON AS A DIRECTION,” by **Paul M. Pearson**

Volume 6 of **The Merton Annual** heralds many changes: a change in editors as Victor Kramer, one of the founding editors, is now joined by Michael Downey and George Kilcourse, with volume editorship rotating on a yearly basis; a change in publishers as it is now published by The Liturgical Press; a change from hardback to paperback with a subsequent dramatic fall in price (counterbalanced by being a much shorter volume than the earlier ones); and finally, and perhaps most significantly, a change in direction heralded by the volume’s new subtitle: “Studies in Culture, Spirituality, and Social Concerns,” a change from the subtitle of the first five volumes which read “Studies in Thomas Merton, Religion, Culture, Literature & Social Concerns.” Perhaps the differences between these two subtitles point to the changing direction — an area to which I will return later in this review.

The contents of this volume follow a similar format to earlier volumes with the publication for the first time of a piece of Merton’s writing, this time his correspondence with Douglas V. Steere and Steere’s comments on their first meeting; an interview with John [Jack] H. Ford, part of the continuing important oral history initiated by Victor Kramer; a selection of various essays; a review of Merton scholarship and publication in 1992; and finally a selection of book reviews and a review of the latest release of Merton’s lectures on cassette tape.

In 1990 the Abbey Center for the Study of Ethics and Culture was incorporated by the Abbey of Gethsemani and the bulk of the essays in this book are papers delivered at two conferences at the Center. Three essays, those by Rosemary Haughton, Rembert Weakland and Francis Kline, come from the leaders of the first

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