

RECONTACTING MERTON'S PASSION

Review of

Thomas Merton

Passion for Peace: The Social Essays

Edited with an introduction by William H. Shannon

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There is an attempt these days to read Merton's writings in the context and chronology of his life's project. William Shannon's new edition of Merton's writings on peace, war, social justice, civil rights, racism, and nonviolence, is a good example. The material presented here has been published before, but is either out of print, or in other hard to find and divergent places. Having Merton's peace and justice essays in a new and fresh volume is a valuable contribution.

Shannon readily admits that some of these contributions are period pieces, and as such are not as urgent as they once were. On the other hand, the majority of the offerings here are not only valuable to the present dialogue on peace and justice, but also have a prophetic impact. Therefore, it is all the more interesting that most of this material was written over thirty years ago, and still has a message for our day. This is not to claim a lack of progress since, but it is to suggest that some of it has come about thanks to the insights and prophetic witness of Merton's life and work.

Merton was one of the first of his generation to lash out at the absolute absurdity of war as a means of settling national disputes. He also fomented against the arms race, the stockpiling of weapons of all kinds, and above all nuclear war. Moreover, his interest in racism and nationalism led to deep reflection on the cause of ethnic violence — not to mention personal violence and hate, in all their particular and personal manifestations, and how these affect all our lives.

What Shannon does here is interesting. He situates each selection in a chronological time frame, and briefly explains the publishing history of each piece. This is helpful as one comes to see the broader context in which Merton's concern took place. As Shannon points out, Merton's work changed in context and style, away from an exclusively "spiritual" form of writing, to one of social and secular and humanistic concern. Indeed, one is simply stunned by the wide range of Merton's reading and writing at this period.

In his thoughtful and inspired introduction, editor Shannon contends that Merton's passionate concern for peace sprang from a deep "compassion." I think this is true. Students of the developmental Merton see this growth in compassion as the key to Merton's deeper insight into the human condition, and into human motivation and impulsion. Merton's prophetic stance can be seen as a result of this compassion. He felt called to cry out against the insanity of war and violence in all their forms.

At the same time, in the depth of his own heart, Merton continued to struggle with the issues of human weakness, depravity, and loss. He was not such a fool as to forget that the roots of evil lie deep within. The day to day events of our world and our lives are but their external manifestation. And so, the mystery and the problem of evil took on new urgency in Merton's life. He cried out against the insanity of war in our time, and asked the church to do the same. Merton had this insight, born from experience, that violence was not the answer. The writings collected here witness to this truth.

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It is with interest that one realizes that for some these essays will now be read for the first time. Those who read and reflected on these writings many years ago can still find insights of value and proposals for progress towards peace. It is interesting, too, that hardly anyone in our day writes on this topic of peace with such passion, urgency, and love. Merton dealt with specific historical situations, and wrote for his day and time, but the deeper underlying issues are valid for our time, and maybe for all time.

The growing tendency to violence and aggression in many forms continues to plague the world of our day. The graphic and obscene statistics need not be listed here, and are fairly well-known. For all the advances in technology and culture in this century, our barbarism and violence have kept pace. It is this mystery of destruction and violence that engaged Thomas Merton in the last decade of his life. Rereading these essays, even after three decades, one can recontact what editor Shannon so aptly terms Merton "passion for peace."