

A "World" Divided in Two

Review of
Contemplation in a World of Action
 by Thomas Merton
 Foreword by Robert Coles
 Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999
 280 pages / \$14.00 paperback
 and
Solitude and Love of the World
 by Thomas Merton
 Foreword by Roland Walls
 London: Burns & Oates, 1998
 83 pages / £6.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Dorothy LeBeau**

As the glue dried out and crumbled, and the pages separated from the binding of my 1973 paperback edition of *Contemplation in a World of Action*, I often wondered why this book of Thomas Merton essays was not reissued. Perhaps, I thought, it was because the majority of the essays dealt with topics concerning monastic or other forms of consecrated religious life that interested only a limited audience. Or maybe it was that references to hippies, Marxists, and the documents of the Second Vatican Council were no longer of interest. And yet I have found so much wisdom in these worn pages.

Well, the wait is over! Two books containing between them the majority of the essays from the original *Contemplation in a World of Action* have recently been reissued. The first, which retains the title *Contemplation in a World of Action*, contains a "restored and corrected" edition of the original essays dealing with monastic life (the first, longer part of the original edition, plus the final section, entitled "Is the Contemplative Life Finished?" transcribed from tapes). A second book, *Solitude and Love of the World* (currently available only in the United Kingdom) presents four of the essays included in the original edition concerned with aspects of solitude, eremitism and the future of contemplative life (three of the essays from the original Part II and "Is the Contemplative Life Finished?" – the one overlap of the two volumes). Unfortunately neither book retains the essays "Notes on the Future of Monasticism," "The Monk Today," "Franciscan Eremitism," and "The Spiritual Father in the Desert Tradition."

The new edition of *Contemplation in a World of Action* contains Merton's mature thoughts about

monastic religious life. These include the challenges of monastic renewal, the relationship of the monk to the modern world, the crisis of identity, questions of monastic freedom, discipline, vows, education, and contemplative consciousness and integration of the whole person. On the surface such essays appear to have a limited appeal. Who but monks, or Merton scholars, would be attracted to these writings? And yet, even when Merton is writing specifically to monks in the late 1960s, his contemplative vision reaches out to all with a desire for authentic living. Three elements of this vision resound throughout these essays: the importance of culture and history, the transformation and integration of the whole person, and the eschatological nature of the Christian vocation.

First, although the world in which Merton wrote has changed in many respects, what has not changed is the reality that one's spirituality is lived out in a particular time and place. Even in a cloistered monastery the world remains a present interior and exterior reality. We can live neither as if we were in the Middle Ages, nor as if we knew exactly which future events, relationships, and circumstances will shape us. Each monk and each Christian is summoned to find God in the world, in himself or herself, and in others, in each present moment.

Second, much of Merton's commentary about the monastic life, as he experienced it, is unfamiliar to most of his non-monastic readers. The genius of monastic life and consecrated religious life is that ideally it provides structures, disciplines and the means to assist men and women in their search for holiness. Unfortunately, as Merton also discovered, these same structures, disciplines and means can also become obstacles, or at least of little help, for a genuine transformation of consciousness. Perhaps, in some respects, the world of the monk is not so radically different from the world of those with families, jobs, social and community obligations. Here too one finds structures, disciplines and means, which may also prove to be of little assistance, or barriers to an authentic spiritual and human transformation. Or to put it another way, perhaps the questions and experiences of Merton regarding the values and challenges of monastic life can be catalysts for those outside of the monastic community. Indeed, the questions that Merton deals with are human and spiritual in nature. What does it mean to be a responsible Christian in the world and church of today? How do we respond when institutions, on which we depend, demand an uncritical compliance to norms and values which are contrary to Gospel life? How do we challenge violence, racism, and consumerism? How does one drawn to an authentic spirituality, a deeper life of prayer, and a commitment to take seriously the universal call to holiness proceed? One way to approach these questions, I believe, lies within the pages of *Contemplation in a World of Action*. It is the contemplative way that transcends monastic, institutional and cultural boundaries. Merton writes of this contemplative vision in many ways, but emphasizes that it means "a special dimension of inner discipline and experience, a certain integrity and fullness of personal development that is not incompatible with action, with creative work, with dedicated love." It is this inner vision which can be awakened in meditation, prayer, and in service to others, as one enters more deeply into the life of God, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The third message repeated throughout *Contemplation in a World of Action* unites Merton's understanding of history and culture with his search for the transformation and integration of the whole person. It is his understanding of eschatology. The Kingdom of God is realized in Christ present in the concrete circumstances of human living. It is the divine hope, the love, the goodness, the very coming of God in history which underlies all human agendas, plans, dreams, joys and sorrows. It is the Kingdom of God in which all is redeemed and made right. It is the hope that emerges in apparent human failure and despair. In page after page Merton summons us to perceive and have

hope in that Kingdom.

The new edition of Thomas Merton's essays in *Contemplation in a World of Action* is, I believe, representative of some of his finest work. Although like any group of essays there is some repetition and unevenness, and the usual examples of Merton hyperbole and idealism, the essays are rich in contemplative wisdom.

One of the difficulties for this reviewer with the "revised and corrected" character of this volume is that there was no indication of the exact location or nature of corrections or changes that were made. Nor were the procedures followed in the restoration process revealed. Unless the reader does a line-by-line comparison of the original text with the new edition, it is not immediately apparent if the changes made are consistent with Merton's intended meaning for the text.

Another disconcerting note was the Foreword written by Dr. Robert Coles. Had I read only this introduction and known nothing of the content of Merton's essays, I would have thought the work to be about psychological growth alone, and most important, I would have missed the joy of reading Merton's mature monastic and contemplative thought. Presumably the orientation of the Foreword is governed by the fact that this reissue is the first in the series "Gethsemani Studies in Psychological and Religious Anthropology," edited by Brother Daniel Carrere, OCSO, who provides the Preface.

Solitude and Love of the World, the second, much briefer book compiled out of the original *Contemplation in a World of Action*, opens with a fine Foreword by Roland Walls, presumably a hermit himself, who outlines many of the themes presented in the essays included in the book. A number of these themes, the love and faithfulness of God, integration of the whole person, discipline, freedom, prayer and monastic renewal, will be familiar to the readers of the new edition of *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Material focused more specifically on the hermit life is found in the essays "The Cell" which incorporates material from the desert ascetical tradition, and "The Case for a Renewal of Eremitism in the Monastic State," an historical review of eremitic life in Western monasticism and the Cistercian tradition. It is these essays, in particular, which might have a limited appeal and may indicate a reason why a separate book was warranted. Personally, although I fail to comprehend the need for two separate books, I can only be pleased that these essays have again been made more readily available to Merton readers.