

Remastering a Master

Review of

Thomas Merton Tapes:

“Irish Mysticism”; “De Conversione” (two tapes);

“Chinese Thought and the Chinese Symbol of Chung”; “The Jesus Prayer”

Kansas City, MO: Credence Communications, 2001

\$9.95 each [“De Conversione”: \$14.95]

Reviewed by **William Koch**

Credence Communications has long been the publisher of the audio tapes made of Merton’s lectures to novices of Gethsemani in the mid-1960s. Four new titles have recently been released (“De Conversione” consisting of two tapes), though certain sides of the tapes are remastered versions of previously published material (side one of “The Jesus Prayer,” side two of “Irish Mysticism,” and both sides of “Chinese Thought and the Chinese Symbol of Chung”). In each tape, Merton provides the listener with spiritual insight, historical data and a glimpse of life behind the cloistered walls of Gethsemani.

In “De Conversione” we hear Merton reading a humorous Golliard poem in Latin, racing through it, the novices laughing at the funny lines. Luckily, for those of us rusty on our Latin, Merton provides a translation. He then goes on to explain St. Bernard’s message to the “hippies” of the twelfth century that what they consider fun is actually slavery, and these words have as much relevance today as they did eight centuries ago. We also hear Merton’s astute observations on literature and society: side two of “The Jesus Prayer” (previously unpublished) opens with Merton asking the novices if they would like some lectures on James Joyce, whom Merton calls “the greatest writer of the twentieth century,” an opinion that was seconded by a panel of scholars thirty-five years later. In the tape on Chinese Thought (previously published), Merton predicts that computers will be the hallmark of the future age. I find this observation remarkable for having been made in the mid-1960s.

Each of these tapes provides the Merton enthusiast with a variety of treats. For those who have read Merton but haven’t heard him, it is a revelation to hear the person whose books have such incisiveness and weight. We especially hear his earnestness as he discusses the changes of the heart one experiences through the Jesus Prayer. When he is explaining the difference between a philosophical assertion and a religious statement, he also brings to his voice the intensity of conviction one “hears” in his writings. Rarely do his writings reveal the bemused Merton, but in these tapes we get a rather breezy Merton, one who laughs a lot and who prompts a lot of laughter from his audience, the novices. I was a bit taken aback by some of his casual, even reductionist descriptions of serious

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matters – calling a bishop “this fella,” or perhaps more worrisome, referring to the flu deaths of several sisters as getting “knocked off.” I’m not really troubled by this; they are only indicative of the humanity of someone we can easily shape into an icon. We hear Merton the teacher, but one who often frustrates the student who is trying to take notes. For example, on side two of the Jesus Prayer tape, Merton begins to give a definition of a “guru” but in mid-sentence breaks off to give an illustration, never to return to the formal definition. Expecting to get a pithy definition, I was a bit frustrated when he went into describing what a guru did, helpful though the illustration was.

The fact that side two of “Irish Mysticism” contains virtually no references to the Irish points up one problem with the Credence production of these interesting tapes. The titles of some of these tapes mischaracterize their contents: “Irish Mysticism” begins with Merton explaining the concept of Nirvana for ten minutes, which is followed by twenty minutes of lecture on Irish mysticism. Side two, which has been published before, contains an explanation of conversion, or softening of the heart, but only cursory reference to the Irish. The liner notes don’t indicate the contents of side two, either. Hopefully, Credence will revise these brief notes to summarize more exactly the contents of each tape, and perhaps change titles to reflect better the focus of each tape.

However, these concerns are incidental to the solid content in Merton’s lectures and the sound quality of the remastered tapes. This aural improvement was especially noticeable when I listened to “Chinese Thought and the Chinese Symbol of Chung,” which had been published before. It sounded as if Merton had just been recorded today, and was physically present in the room where I was listening to the tape. I don’t know if early editions of audio tapes picked up the sounds of birds chirping outside the cloister walls, but they chirp almost to distraction in “Chinese Thought.” In *A Vow of Conversation*, Merton notes “a sweet dialogue of wood thrushes outside the window” (52) and that is exactly what one senses here. As I listened to these tapes, I felt as if I myself were a novice, absorbing my surroundings – the sound of a man whose writings spoke to my heart, accompanied by the vivid sounds of nature, as if it were another monastic choir, seconding Merton’s ideas.