"Let me be quite succinct": A Concise Merton Anthology

Review of
Thomas Merton: Essential Writings
Selected with an Introduction by Christine M. Bochen
Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000
191 pages / $14 paperback

Reviewed by **Jon Power-Shickler**

Thomas Merton: Essential Writings is the most recent addition to a select number of anthologies designed to introduce Merton to contemporary readers. The task, however, is not a simple one, for a number of reasons. First, although it would be a great joy poring over all of Merton's published works, the great classics, the personal favorites, the journals and all the posthumous publications, it would be daunting to arrive (in under 200 pages no less!) at what might agreeably be called the "essential writings." Given a writer with the breadth and depth of detached involvement, intellectual curiosity, and challenging self-searching that characterized Merton, where would you, with such a task, begin? And what, exactly, is meant by that word, "essential"? Assuming it means something more than a type of market-ready "Thomas Merton's Greatest Hits" (a temptation this collection admirably avoids), does it refer instead to those works that demonstrate the essence or center of what Merton stood for, *or* the essence of *who he exactly was*? – something often more evident in his letters and journals than in his other writing. Or do we mean works that are "essential" in the sense of being invaluable, works we as readers today can and should not be left without? If this is the sense we mean, or at least one of them, then the compiler's task grows even more impressive, since all three previous major Merton anthologies – *The Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962; rev. ed. Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974), *Thomas Merton Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), and the more specialized *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays* (New York: Crossroad, 1995) – were very well selected, thorough, and successful in their own right.

Yet, with all these challenges, Christine M. Bochen, professor of religious studies at Nazareth College and immediate past president of the International Thomas Merton Society, has created an anthology that not only aptly introduces Merton, but also helpfully organizes his thought into three phases, representing Merton's own responses to the "call to contemplation," the "call to compassion," and the "call to unity," a useful framework for understanding Merton's life whether reading him privately or as part of an organized curriculum, both purposes for which Bochen's collection is well suited. Each section includes familiar classic Merton passages such as "Every moment and every event of every man's life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries

---

Jon Power-Shickler, a former ITMS Daggy Youth Scholar, is currently working on a Ph.D. in American Literature at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC.

thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality . . ." (55-57, reprinted in the section "A Call to Contemplation" from *New Seeds of Contemplation*). The section "A Call to Compassion" includes more "essential" Merton (in both senses: "central" to Merton's development and "indispensable" to his readers' knowledge of his work), for instance, the oft-quoted "Fourth and Walnut" experience (90-92, from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*) in which Merton joyfully discovers himself a part of, not merely apart from, the rest of the world. It is perhaps, though, the section "A Call to Unity" that offers the most interesting and freshest material to readers who are familiar with the Merton classics but have not read every scrap or ream of Mertoniana available or listened to every recorded talk the Merton Center contains. Here, amid several other less familiar Merton writings, a reader will find a significant portion of Merton's preface to a 1958 collection of his complete works published in Argentina, as well as a selection from Merton's trip to Alaska in 1968 (Bochen describes the selection as "excerpted from an adaptation of a transcript of a conference").

What emerges from Dr. Bochen's organization of the material into three parts (the calls to contemplation, compassion, and unity – though one wonders why section three isn't "*communion*" for a purer alliterative parallelism) is a sense that Merton's spirituality (and all true spirituality) grows within a context and a tradition, as a part of a community, however that community is structured or recognized, and thus the text offers readers welcome clarity in a popular spiritual culture that often confuses the search for the center in the Self with self-centeredness. The text, by moving from "a call to contemplation," a silent "awakening of the heart" as Bochen calls it, toward "a call to unity," draws contemporary readers away from a perhaps initially mistaken "vision quest" mentality which they may bring to the book, to a more fully integrated and embodied spirituality which they should take away from it. At the same time however, Bochen is careful to ensure that casual readers, seeing the text organized in three parts, are not tempted to perceive contemplation as merely an initial purifying stage, a starting point, gradually discarded along a linear way to higher and higher callings to more activistic existence, rather than recognizing contemplation as the root and center of all action. True contemplation to Merton was not only *primary* to his social consciousness, it was *central*. Although the text could do more to ensure this understanding ("A Call to Contemplation" is regrettably only 37 pages long, the shortest of the three sections, leaving out, among other possible choices, what seems to be a truly *essential* clarifying passage from *New Seeds*, "What Contemplation is Not"), Bochen does choose several excellent passages to conclude the book with a fully realized sense of the contemplative center of true unity: "And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one" (173, from The *Asian Journal*). Further: "In a very special way, *meditation* and *contemplation* are fruitful for Unity, since in them the Christian leaves the dispersion and distraction of everyday life and sinks down to deeper unity within himself, by the quieting of passion and fantasy, the putting off of self, and the complete willingness to obey God without reserve" (183, from the essay *The Poorer Means,* published in England in 1965).

My one wish, which I suspect many readers will share, is that the anthology were longer. While the excerpt format does well to create a clear theme for each section, many of the individual excerpts just seem too short (passages range from 4-7 pages at their longest while others are often merely one or two sentences). Although a number of Merton's passages reveal his desire for clear brevity ("Let

me be quite succinct" [152]; "Let's see how I can put it in a few words" [52]), Merton's work does seem to suffer slightly – perhaps an inevitable result of the anthology format – from being clipped into passages rather than being freed to develop as complexly as his thought often did in its complete form. As an introduction however, the text does an excellent job of fitting an impressive array of the Merton canon, his interiority, his ecumenism, his opposition to war, his love of nature, his acerbic or prayerful verse, his wit, into a relatively small space, and leaving the reader wanting more of Merton's writing and the spirit Merton sought.

The book, which includes a useful "life and works" chronology as well as Bochen's excellent 28-page introduction to Merton's life and influences, is attractively bound as a trade paperback and is well edited, with only a few typos, the only bothersome one being a misprint of the title of a Merton book on page 48 (*The Asian Journal* is, albeit fairly appropriately, miscalled *The Asian Journey*). Further, less patient readers might be somewhat frustrated by the abbreviation of the titles of sources. Although a key to the abbreviations is provided at the beginning of the book, a reader would like more meaningful and immediate gratification of where a given passage appears than "CP 345-49," "HGL 482" or "LG." Such abbreviations are fine in scholarly journals but here seem out of place, rather coldly academic, and an avoidable, if slight, aggravation.

Thomas Merton: Essential Writings is published as part of the Modern Spiritual Masters Series, which includes such anthology standbys as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Teilhard de Chardin, and G.K Chesterton, as well as some names that are less likely to come immediately to mind, but gratefully welcome: Edith Stein, Flannery O'Connor, and Oscar Romero, as well as Merton's friend, the now widely-read Vietnamese Buddhist monk and writer Thich Nhat Hanh (who not only was the subject of a Merton essay, "Nhat Hanh is My Brother" in 1968's *Faith and Violence*, but also wrote the introduction for the most recent edition of Merton's posthumously published classic, *Contemplative Prayer).* Dr. Bochen's preface aptly describes her purpose in bringing this accessible, concise anthology to contemporary readers: "Writing to a student who had asked him how to study, Merton advised the young man to study 'to find the truth and to awaken deeper levels of life in yourself.' May we who read and study Merton do just that" (18). She puts it quite succinctly.