

Graced by Passion and Compassion

Review of

Thomas Merton & Judaism:

Holiness in Words – Recognition, Repentance, and Renewal

Edited by Beatrice Bruteau, with a Foreword by Victor A. Kramer

Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae: 2003

416 pages / \$25.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Richard E. Sherwin**

Who was Thomas Merton? I don't know. I know only what I've pieced together from the seventeen essays, together with the various forewords, that comprise *Thomas Merton & Judaism*. What is Judaism? I don't know. I know only what of the great tradition I've managed to meet and live. I'm not a scholar of Merton or Roman Catholic anything. I'm not a scholar of Judaism. I try to live the latter, as best I can, as an Orthopraxic Jew in a world full of people and institutions unhappy that Jews exist. Which is strange for me, since being Jewish is one of the most important physical, social, and spiritual joys of my life.

So I'm not going to review this book by citing a source for every – or almost any – comment or judgment I make about either Merton or Judaism or what I perceive the various writers to see as Merton. I've been raised to read and study holy text with commentaries on commentaries on commentaries in order to get to the simple meaning of the text. Very little is as it seems in this world, and least of all a human soul coming to maturity in a human life. Everything's complex. And I don't want this review to look like one of those Christian evangelical texts (or for that matter those Rabbinic weekly-reading sermons) so drowned in citations the individual point is lost. What I'm saying is my take on the whole book, and insofar as the book's writings represent the conference it stemmed from, the conference I was unable to attend.

That said, the Thomas Merton I've come to know is a man of deep and outgoing passions, with a need to love the world by freeing it and his soul in terms he'd recognize as acceptable to his great love, G-d in the form of Jesus Christ, whom he saw as the greatest liberator of all. While the essays mention Merton's activities with the development of social and political liberation theology (the Berrigan brothers for example), this remains in passing. The major liberation movement Merton is shown as engaged in is something I as a Jew would not have expected any Catholic to try, let alone anyone to succeed. It was the liberation of the Roman Catholic Church from its original sin of anti-Judaism and its major product historically, the Shoah, the destruction of six million Jews.

This is suggested in the book to be either a result of, or a parallel to, a personal spiritual love

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affair his soul was engaged in developing about the same time, for a Jewish allegorical figure named Proverb who loved him passionately, freely and chastely. This Proverb appeared to him after an epiphanic experience in Louisville where he recognized the spiritual radiance of all humanity, and especially of all women. And it was followed, apparently, by an equally profound love for a nurse when he was once in hospital.

With such external and internal liberation theologies engaging body, mind and soul, it is to me at least not at all surprising that Merton was a monastic. He was wise enough to know that whatever he would become to the world or himself, he needed the stability of an order like the Cistercians. And he found and retained it, as it found and helped create him – the Abbey of Gethemani in rural Kentucky, a place of grand simplicity in rolling hill country, with a devotional life of work, meditation, prayer, and for him, writing.

Externally then there are two aspects of Merton and Judaism that the book's essays emphasize. Most attention is given to Merton's timely assistance to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a member of the Jewish delegation to Vatican II, in thwarting a rather insulting part of third draft of the Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate* (all four versions of which are given in Appendix A) as it related to Jews. The second draft had been radical and liberating: in it the Church reversed its centuries-old theological attitude, condemning anyone charging the Jewish people past or present with *deicide* ("Christ-killing"/ "God-killing") and asserting as well that Judaism then and now, Biblical and Rabbinic, contained within it God's continued uninterrupted promise of salvation for Jews. Since the essays make clear that both of these charges were the source of support for centuries of disgusting anti-semitism, pogroms, and Auschwitz, this turn-about was indeed radical, liberating both Church and Jews from the grip of a lethal theology: killing the soul of the Church and the body of Jews.

Merton, shocked by the Shoah and by Rolf Hochhuth's play *The Deputy* which charged Pius XII with complicity in the genocide of the Jews, by omission and commission, came to believe and write that the Church needed to repent its part in the sin, as an institution. It wasn't sufficient to say as the Church has since said, that it deplores anti-Semitic and anti-Jewish acts done by individuals, while the Church's institutional hands remain pure. To me, as ambivalently as Pilate's.

However the business of institutions is to remain in business, and the Church apologized for the behavior of individual members, while the book makes clear those anti-Semitic saints of the Church like John Chrysostom and Aquinas and Francis of Assisi also mouthed vile accusations against the synagogue and Jews. And as saints, they did represent the best of the Church. So . . .

Heschel turned to Merton for help in persuading the Council to cancel its third draft, its waffling restatement of *deicide* and supersessionism (Jews couldn't be saved in Judaism, they had to accept Christ, so the Church maintained missionary institutions to "help" them see the Church's "light"; Christianity as the "New Israel" had inherited G-d's promises originally given to the Jews; the Jews were stupid or stubborn or evil for not accepting Christ as G-d). Merton helped. He was passionate, competent, and knew his Church. He wrote Augustin Cardinal Bea – the man the Pope put in charge of the Ecumenical aspect of the council – urging greater activity to prevent this insult to the Jews, and this insensitive rejection of Church responsibility for the Shoah. Apparently, Merton's support did help. As a result of it and all the other Jewish and Christian activity, the fourth version of the Council's decree at the very least allowed Judaism past and present to retain G-d's promise of salvation, and dodged the whole issue of *gens deicida* (a god-killing people). This proved a major change, and was passed by an overwhelming majority of bishops.

The upside is that the Church has since steadily produced and followed up on administrative educational decrees which insist that all references to Jews past and present in the teaching and preaching of the Church (see Appendix C for an example) must not accuse them of deicide, and must emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus and the New Testament. The Bible as Merton argued cannot be understood if not read also as a Jew would read it.

The downside is that waffling on deicide leaves open support tacit or otherwise for such films as Mel Gibson's version of Christ's passion, which will probably do as much harm as the good done by the council. Hollywood is at least temporarily as powerful as the Church. But I'm betting the Church's revisions will outlast Gibson's approach. The problem is the amount of harm that will be stimulated against living Jews – mentally, physically, socially. That is uncountable.

The second aspect the essays emphasize is the variety and quality of Merton's relationships with Jews, personally and by their exchanged writings. As I see it, Merton quite naturally as a devotional mystic responded most easily to that part of Judaism most like him – outgoing, devout, parabolic, mystical, optimistic, and liberating. This focused on the Chassidic Tales translated and edited by Martin Buber, who also insisted on emphasizing the importance of personality in one's treatment of the world in his philosophy of I-Thou vs. the materialist's I-It approach. It included the writings of Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, and Heschel's masterpiece on *The Sabbath* and *The Prophets*. Heschel himself came from a Chassidic background. And the book pretty much ends with a description of Merton's relationship via letters and a personal meeting with Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, an ordained Lubavitcher Chassid, whose life was much like that of the rabbis of Buber's translated tales, and who himself was engaged in creating a Renewal program for Judaism.

I'm not qualified to judge such great men, individually or in their relationships. I do feel however I have to place them in relationship to my Jewishness. Buber with all his greatness was a secular Jew who found piety in and through spiritual philosophy and literature, the latter of which he extracted from the narrative history of their Jewish lives into the parables of his - moving the tales from total immersion in orthodox Judaism to a discrete isolated "wisdom" literature to be cherished and read almost nostalgically, much like Buber's translation of Chuang Tzu's work (another point of contact with Merton) – international, and I would argue, essentially uprooted piety. I like reading these kinds of things, and so did Merton. I'd argue that it was precisely their deracination that made them transferable among believers. That was the upside. The downside is that nearly all the particulars of Judaism that brought these tales into existence and keep them in living faith get distorted or evaporated in the process. That is, it is in a way the non-particularity of the Jewishness of the Chassidic Tales, and I'd argue, of Heschel's work, that makes them able to reach out to so many non-Jews, so strongly. Jews read them from within Judaism and they need no resetting. Christians make them a slightly exotic version of spiritual wisdoms they either already possess or don't have to work too hard to possess. As Zen koans do to me, so Buber and Heschel's writings did to Merton, I suspect – showing us what our own faiths possess from an angle that freshens everything, and stretching our faith healthfully in the process, sometimes. And sometimes just staying foreign, indigestible but radiant.

I'm suggesting it was the aspect of non-Jewishness that made Buber's work available to Merton, and the aspect of approved Christian emphasis on personality in deity and the individual soul's search for G-d, and G-d for man, that made Heschel's more easily acceptable to Merton. The Church always said the part of the Old Testament that is still valid as preface to the New Testament is the

prophets, who it claimed were in conflict with the priests (and the Levitical and later Rabbinic halachic commandments specific to Jews) just as the Church was.

I don't mean to suggest that the essays say it was an easy road for Merton to walk. His outreach to Judaism was not new to the Church, but what was new, and what radically became the attitude of the Church after Vatican II, was the outreach to Jews as people with a valid saving religion whose viewpoints could help the Church re-see, refresh, and perhaps even deepen her own view of her Christian mission to the world. This some critics call pluralism, some see it more limitedly as inclusivism. Me, I couldn't care which you call it. It marks a major change in the Church's attitude to Jews, and Judaism, and whether Jews like it or not, the Church still has real influence as an institution and as a faith on the minds and souls of much of mankind.

So Merton is minimally a Hindu mahatma (great-soul), maximally a Christian pre-saint. In between, where I live, and most of the spiritual non-athletes of world dwell, I presume, he was certainly a man whose passion and compassion graced what he touched. I do not find him as some critics say trying to absorb the Jewish suffering into himself and thereby ignoring the Jews who suffer. He was trying to cut the link he saw between Christ and Auschwitz, by making the Church change. Whether or not he cut the link, he did foresee and encourage and perhaps help achieve that change. And for this he comes across as indeed a great man. And retrospectively of course, the book and the conference about him and his relationships to Judaism emerge as a very interesting and soul-stirring event.