

Nourishing Heart and Intellect

Review of
The Merton Annual, Volume 17
 Edited by Victor A. Kramer
 Louisville: Fons Vitae Press, 2004
 376 pages / \$19.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Timothy Fullerton**

The breadth and depth of this volume of *The Merton Annual* just reinforces for me a fact that has become so very clear to me in the forty years I have been reading and studying Thomas Merton: there is little that escaped his lively intellect. As always, Merton approached his spectrum of interests with a prayerful, contemplative, monastic creativity. (The words “prayerful” and “contemplative” are not meant to exclude his contagious and exuberant enthusiasm.) In working on the Asian sections of *The Other Side of the Mountain*, I clearly felt his sense of wonder and excitement. It comes through with such innocence that some orthodox Catholics are convinced that he was ready to chuck Catholicism and become a Buddhist.

The articles by Patrick Bludworth and Joseph Raab cover good ground here. Bludworth points out that Merton saw the value of the Spiritual Father or Guru for the person who sincerely wants to deepen his contemplative connection to God. Merton points out that while the role of the Spiritual Father is alive and well in the East with its Roshis and Rinpoches, the Christian West has lost that ideal to a great extent. The tradition of the Desert Father still lives in the Christian Orthodox East and the great “Northern Thebaid” of Russia, and the place of the Guide and Shaykh is firmly established in Sufism. Bludworth points out that Merton observed that a stage of religious maturity had been reached that would allow the Western monastic to learn from Hindu and Buddhist traditions without compromising his or her commitments.

Raab continues the theme of Merton’s ability to absorb and utilize all that he learned into his own Christian tradition. He rightly says that the language Merton uses in describing his experience at Polonnaruwa is “both intriguing and challenging.” He goes on to describe the epiphany that Merton had as both deepening his spiritual connection with the East, as well as deepening his own contemplative rootedness.

These two articles attracted my special interest because of my own connection with Buddhism. I am glad that more is coming out that shows the Christian depths of Merton’s understanding of Buddhism. I have had many discussions with Roman Catholic laity and clergy who are convinced that

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Merton was going to become a Buddhist monk. I have also had a similar discussion with some of my Buddhist colleagues who were just as convinced of the same thing. Granted, the reactions to this misapprehension were quite different, but both groups seemed disappointed that Merton was remaining true to his Christian monastic roots, which were solid and mature enough that he could approach other traditions openly and at a level of praxis.

This volume also is rich in yet another way. I have just finished reading the long “forbidden book” *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, a work of Merton’s so crucial right now in our history. Patricia Burton’s article, “The Forbidden Book: Thomas Merton’s *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*” is a fine and fascinating discussion. It leads one through the labyrinthine ways of censorship within the order, and Merton’s obedience to his superiors. I am always amazed when I read that Merton was told that it was not the place of a monk to be writing about peace and nuclear war! It was one of those times when I am reminded of a phrase my late grandfather would use when he heard something like that: “Do these people ever listen to themselves?” Burton points out in her editorial note to chapter fifteen of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (which is included in the *Annual*) that this chapter was “central to Merton’s message: that all Christians must take responsibility for bringing about peace, since love, peace and nonviolence were the original Christian message.” Peace is indeed integral to the Christian life, and Merton’s message rings clear today, and perhaps with a bit more urgency than it even did in the 1960s. Today, we see many Christians, even entire church bodies, endorsing preemptive war as an acceptable manner of dealing with a changed world. In Merton’s chapter fifteen, titled “Christian Perspectives in World Crisis,” he concludes with this observation: “the Pope [John XXIII] says that the mentality of suspicion and hatred is unfortunately encouraged and strengthened by those who possess the art of forming public opinion and have a partial monopoly over it! In very serious terms he warned these men ‘to fear the stern judgment of God and of history and to proceed cautiously with respect and a sense of moderation.’” This seems to me to be the case of a prophet (Merton) quoting another prophetic man (Pope John) to a nation and a media that needs to pay close and heedful attention to what is being said here, even forty years after Merton wrote this.

My own experiences with world religions led me to Edward Kaplan’s article on Merton and Judaism: “A Humanly Impoverished Thirst for Light: Thomas Merton’s Receptivity to the Feminine, to Judaism, and to Religious Pluralism.” This article centers on Merton’s exchanges with another of my personal “heroes,” Abraham Joshua Heschel. It also shows quite clearly how Merton’s openness to the feminine grew along the lines of ancient Jewish Zoharic/Kabbalistic mysticism. I especially like the statement Kaplan makes in closing his article: “Thomas Merton and Abraham Heschel incite us to renew the Holy Spirit, the presence of God, in our hearts and in our communities. All of us, Jews, Christians, Muslims and others, must recover the spirit of Vatican II, the Holy Spirit (in Hebrew, *ruah ha-kodesh*) beyond all beliefs, as we nurture, through our irreducible particularity, our reverence for what is universally sacred.” This, again, speaks words that must be heard in this world today.

There is a lot more to be read and mined in this excellent volume. I have touched on the articles that were of the most interest to me, which is the function of a good anthology. There are ten good reviews at the end, which are like a cherry on the whipped cream (low fat, of course) adorning the fine repast of the *Annual*.

In taking the volume as a whole, I return to my comments at the beginning. Merton is a timely prophet who has engaged me for forty years. He cannot be pigeon-holed as a discontented monk who was looking elsewhere for spiritual food, as many conservative and “orthodox” Catholics view Merton.

His was a restless, searching intellect, powered by a heart that was firmly rooted in his own traditions. What he wanted to do was enrich the Christian contemplative milieu with some of the elements of praxis he hoped to learn from his contact with the East. The fact that there are now men who are both Catholic Priests and Zen Masters is a tribute to what Merton saw beginning to dawn in the West.

Merton's writings on peace are so crucial for us now! His was, and is, a prophetic voice. Our society has become infected with what Pope John Paul II has rightly called the "Culture of Death," and while many Christians are actively involved in fighting some aspects of that culture (abortion, out of wedlock births, and poverty) many of those same people support war and are proponents of capital punishment. Merton has much to say to all of us, regardless of our religions. His great gift was his willingness to constantly grow beyond what he had always been, to learn, and to remain congruent throughout his life.

This *Annual* is a wonderful tribute to that Prophetic voice. It gave me much to feed both my intellect and my heart, and to challenge both in those times when it would be too easy to say, "What can I do? What can one person do?" Fortunately Father Louie has some very good answers to that. To conclude, I will cite part of the poem Raab quotes in his article – it is a fitting closure and challenge:

The whole
 World is secretly on fire. The stones
 Burn, even the stones
 They burn me. How can a man be still or
 Listen to all things burning? How can he dare
 To sit with them when
 All their silence
 Is on fire?

***The Merton Annual* vol. 17 is available to ITMS members at a special price of \$15
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 send a check made out to *The Merton Annual* to:
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