An Ardent Champion of Peace

Review of
Cold War Letters
By Thomas Merton
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Reviewed by **James T. Fisher**

The most striking feature of Thomas Merton's *Cold War Letters* – especially to an historian – is the total absence of any reference to Vietnam, whether construed as part of "Indochina" along with Cambodia and Laos or subsumed within a discourse on Southeast Asia (in a rare reference to Asia, Merton suggests that Latin America was the more economically and politically volatile region). These letters – composed between October 1961 and October 1962 and sent from the Abbey of Gethsemani to a diverse array of correspondents – thus evoke the final days of the "old world" order which configured global conflict strictly in terms of superpower geopolitics. Merton's focus remains the trans-Atlantic theater, with Western Europe precariously suspended between nuclear adversaries the Soviet Union and the United States; in his view the odds favored mutually destructive strikes sooner not later.

Merton's "Eurocentric" orientation is somewhat surprising: while few Americans could locate Vietnam on a globe as of 1962 (though it had been a full-fledged client state of the U.S. since 1954), Thomas Merton was among a relative handful of American Christians conversant at the time with the leading religious traditions of East Asia, including Tibetan Buddhism. "Certainly the Western idea of Buddhism is terribly confused," he wrote to a Tibetan student at the University of Washington in March 1962. "Buddhism," he explained to Tashi Tshering, "does not set up barriers and divisions, but rather destroys them, seeking the deepest unity, beyond all oppositions" (89-90). A little over a year later a 67-year old Buddhist monk would set himself afire in a Saigon street in protest of the Catholic regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem which denied equal rights to Buddhists; seven more self-immolations followed. Merton's tone would change dramatically in the wake of these and other cataclysmic events from 1963.

In many ways, then, these *Cold War Letters* find Thomas Merton at a moment in time when his persona was poised midway – spiritually if not chronologically – between that of *The Seven Storey Mountain* and that of *The Asian Journal*. The letters were also composed in the months just prior to John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, which – in addition to such documents of the impending Vatican Council as *Gaudium et Spes* – meant that Merton was finally no longer "alone" in the Church as an ardent champion of peace. As William H. Shannon explains in his preface to this volume: "No Catholic priest or bishop (at least none well-known) had spoken out against war" as of 1961 (xix). Merton's witness – in the form of these communications – stands out against this context of American Catholic reticence to forthrightly address issues of war and peace. The Trappist *does*, it is true, characteristically tailor his

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message to the sensibilities of his correspondents. The effort of some Catholics to approve a nuclear first-strike policy on grounds of just war theory "makes me vomit," he wrote to the non-Catholic liberal Wilbur H. "Ping" Ferry in January 1962 (63). Merton similarly critiques misuse of just-war tradition in a December 1961 letter to Dorothy Day, but here the commentary is much more nuanced. Merton well knew that Day's pacifist Catholic Worker movement rejected not only just war theory in its entirety but also the natural-law tradition on which it was based. "I don't think we ought to simply discard the concept of natural law as irrelevant," he counsels Day. In a moving coda he adds: "I want with my whole heart to realize and fulfill my communion of nature with my brother, in order that I may be by that very fact one with him in Christ" (32-33).

For Merton nothing less than "the honor and holiness of the Church as the guardian of truth and the minister of mercy and salvation to men" (25) was at stake in the race against nuclear annihilation, as he insisted to the Jesuit former Archbishop of Bombay, Thomas Roberts, in December 1961. Merton was prone to apocalyptic language, evident in his claim to Roberts that the U.S. was suffering "a moral collapse, in which the policy of the nation is more or less frankly oriented toward a war of extermination" (25). While there was surely truth in this observation, it is somewhat ironic in light of his oft-expressed admiration for President John F. Kennedy, since nuclear brinkmanship was a component of New Frontier assertiveness as the Cuban Missile Crisis would confirm. Merton's muted response to that event in the final letters printed in this volume is also most revealing: in a letter of October 30, 1962 he indicates that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's actions to avert nuclear catastrophe reflected his priority of political over military responses to "international problems" (142). Yet as Merton acknowledged to a different correspondent just a day earlier: "I haven't heard much about the touchy situation in Cuba so I won't talk about it" (140). Much as readers often marvel at Merton's grasp of global religious and political issues from the vantage point of a Kentucky monastery, it remained the case that he was necessarily limited in his access to the wide range of commentary and analyses others enjoyed. This did not mean he was naïve, as some critics alleged; he was simply not always well-informed or free to express his most deeply-held convictions. A subtext running through these pages concerns Merton's ongoing struggle with his community's censorship apparatus, a dilemma which lends an element of melodrama if not pathos to his correspondence.

Thomas Merton was, however, deeply influential and he knew it: discerning just when and how the author seeks to motivate a correspondent to greater action and/or reflection is a challenge implicit in the text. Sometimes his desire is transparent: "Every form of healthy human contact with Russia and above all China [showing here unusual attentiveness to Asia] is to be encouraged," he wrote to Ethel Kennedy, the president's sister-in-law (and an avowed Merton admirer) in December 1961. "We have got to see each other as people and not as demons. . . . I am working on some projects to help further the cause of peace, and thought I might tell you of some of the ideas that have been crystallizing out as I do so" (27). At other times – as in his aforementioned advice to Dorothy Day not to wholly jettison natural law teaching – his persuasion is more subtle. Merton's impulse to challenge American Catholic nationalism as idolatrous is conveyed to a variety of correspondents: he sought a more cosmopolitan, more theologically literate and less self-satisfied faith community than he discerned from the monastery. "Apparently much popular thought in this country simply goes along with the immoral and secularist attitude that since Communism is evil," he wrote to the distinguished church historian John Tracy Ellis in December 1961, "we can do anything we like to wipe it out and thus prevent it from gaining ground and overwhelming us" (19). That conviction would be sorely shaken in the years ahead, years that would also see a deepening of Merton's compassion for others in their human frailties even as he more fully embraced his own.