

Castle Culture in Church and World

Review of
Thomas Merton on Franz Kafka
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 4 tracks: 1 MP3 CD / \$29.95

Reviewed by **Ron Dart**

Thomas Merton had a definite feel and leaning for writers who were on the cutting edge of the literary ethos. The four June 1967 lectures by Merton on Kafka (and other writers and themes) is Merton, in some ways, at his creative and biting best. A raw, honest and impatient Merton emerges in these lectures, actually a set of taped reflections recorded at his hermitage that cover a variety of issues, but Merton returns again and again to Kafka's *The Castle* in these ruminations. Merton used *The Castle* as a knife of sorts to peel away much folly and foolishness in the monastic leadership in Gethsemani (perhaps too intensely and often), monastic life and dated rules, the Cistercian order, the Roman Catholic Church and larger public and political issues that dominated the day. But, to a summary of the four lectures!

The first track is entitled "In Dialogue with the Taizé Community: The Contemplative in the World" (June 12 1967). The title, in some ways, does not include the wider content of the insights by Merton. There was, of course, Merton's concern with brothers from the Taizé community who were too concerned about getting official approval from the Roman Catholic Church, and Gethsemani monks feeling intimidated by the Taizé contemplatives as they worked in inner-city areas of the USA. Merton makes numerous barbed comments about his abbot, James Fox (significantly Dom James retired as abbot in September 1967 to become a hermit). But Kafka's *The Castle* hovers in the background in these lectures. Briefly put, *The Castle* can be read at different levels, including theological, ecclesial and broader public, social and political levels. *The Castle*, in brief, is about the surveyor "K" who comes to a village at the base of a mountain to work and live. A castle stands high up the mountainside and the villagers are dependent on orders from the castle, but few, if any, have any real personal and ongoing relationship with those in the castle. In short, those above are rarely in meaningful contact with those below but those below are convinced those above exist for their good. But do they? Such was Merton's interest in Kafka's parable. How do honest spiritual pilgrims in the lowland village make sense of a notion of God or the Church defined and dominated by castle authorities who control in such uncertain, impersonal, detached and ambiguous ways? Merton's critique of his abbot, the folly of Taizé trying to please the Catholic hierarchy and much of the Cistercian way had a sense and smell of

Ron Dart has taught in the Department of Political Science, Philosophy and Religious Studies at University of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia since 1990. During the 1980s he was on staff with Amnesty International. He has published more than 35 books, including most recently *George Grant: Athena's Aviary* (2018), *Erasmus: Wild Bird* (2017) and *The North American High Tory Tradition* (2016). He has edited *White Gulls & Wild Birds: Essays on C. S. Lewis, Inklings and Friends & Thomas Merton* (2015) and *Thomas Merton and the Counterculture: A Golden String* (2016) and serves on the national executive of The Thomas Merton Society of Canada.

castle culture. Such structures and bureaucratic institutions often undermine the very thing they exist to support and affirm, administrators and their hierarchy often silencing the gifted poets, creative artists, prophets and true community seekers – such is castle culture.

Track 2 is called “Ideas on Virginity: *The Castle*, Gregory of Nyssa, and Blaise Pascal” (June 15 1967). There is, in fact, little mention of *The Castle* in these reflections or for that matter of Pascal. Merton is more interested in digging much deeper into the more radical, revolutionary and transformative reasons for the notion of chastity and virginity. Gregory of Nyssa and the Fathers were mostly discussed, Joan of Arc and Pascal lightly touched on and skimmed over. Merton often returns to the theme of freedom and creativity, the individual’s liberty that is central to his thinking. Merton rightly raises the perennial question: freedom from what and liberty for what? A culture that indulges sexual and sensual appetites in the name of freedom is not truly free. Such a reductionistic ethos is, in fact, a form of being caged and imprisoned by the lowest appetites. The classical notion of virginity and chastity, above all else, was meant to free people from being cabined, cribbed and confined to such addictive desires; and just as people can be slaves of such internal drives, there are external forces that can imprison also. Pascal faced the castle mentality of the Jesuits; and Joan of Arc, freed from lower desires, played her radical, creative and short-lived role in the freeing of France from the English. Kafka and *The Castle* are rarely mentioned in these reflections although ever present in the background, the castle a metaphor for multiple interpretations.

Track 3 is called “Merton’s Audio Journals: *The Plague* by Camus, *The Castle* by Kafka, and the General Chapter” (June 17 1967). These reflections are considerably longer than the previous two segments, and for the most part Merton does a deep dive into all the changes occurring in post-Vatican-II Roman Catholic life and monasticism. As ever, Merton questions mere change for the sake of trendy change, and he is engaged in probing to the essence of the faith from its historic accidents. Once again, Merton focuses on Dom James’ lack of a deeper understanding of the monastic life, willing to make superficial changes but not probing deeper to recognize the real changes needed. Merton does turn again, though, to *The Castle* in relationship to Camus’ *The Plague* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* (in which Camus interacts with Kafka). In his approach to both Camus and Kafka, Merton is taken by their creative revolt against false consciousness in regards to both religion and political structures, naïve obedience that many in the village give to such castle docility and the dehumanizing results that are the consequence. Merton was particularly taken by the revolt of Amalia in *The Castle*, who dared to disobey immoral requests by castle leadership, and the consequent rejection she faced. Needless to say, Camus, in his different literary way, does much the same thing in *The Plague* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*. I might add, though, that much of the reflection here does not, in any deep or sustained way, deal with Camus or Kafka. Merton connected some obvious dots but never meaningfully developed his thinking on the novels or writers. Merton had, of course, discussed Camus more extensively in previous essays.

Track 4, “Final Thoughts on *The Castle*” (June 21 1967), lingers longer with Kafka than the previous reflections, delving into Kafka’s father’s simplistic notions of Judaism and Kafka’s more thoughtful differences with such a view. Merton reflected on how someone like Kafka’s father (and there were many) could hold to such an immature and undeveloped notion of faith and

never raise minimal questions about it – such was Kafka’s dilemma, and Merton’s. How does one remain faithful without slipping into a reactionary form of religious agnosticism or atheism, on the one hand, or reducing faith to superficial formulas and clichés, on the other? It was this “bad faith” that dominated much popular and some sophisticated organizational Roman Catholic life and thought against which Merton rebelled and revolted, finding a fellow traveler when reading and engaging Kafka. *The Castle* is briefly alluded to in this reflection, but more time is spent on the metaphor of Kafka and his father as two types on the faith journey, the former a questioning, doubting, creative, prophetic vision, the latter a form of mindless village mentality that serves establishment power and a castle ethos. Merton also mentions Kafka’s short story “Before the Law,” in which a gatekeeper keeps an honest and questioning pilgrim from passing through the gate on his journey into deeper meaning – yet another short story analogy of a castle mentality and as Merton aptly said, we have “turned Christ into a castle organization” – the best kept out, the mediocre ruling and running the castle and village.

There are a few quibbles to note by way of conclusion. First, the title of the CD is *Thomas Merton on Franz Kafka*. The reflections by Merton are certainly not about Kafka’s subtle and layered life and writings in any serious or substantive sense. Second, while Kafka’s *The Castle* is mentioned in all of these sections, Merton does not do any sophisticated or in-depth detailed analysis of the novel. There are nods to the book and applications to Merton’s contemporary situation, but there is much more to *The Castle* than Merton takes the time to probe. Third, Merton has a way, in these lectures, of lightly landing on solid thinkers and activists but never immersing himself in their insights. Fourth, I wonder if Merton’s perpetual barbed and prickly assaults on the thickness of Dom James were truly that needful and necessary. I can understand his frustrations with James, but the repeated demeaning of the abbot can become tiresome and irritating. Fifth, I wonder if Merton’s tendency to divide reality into two classes is an excessive generalization: creative thinkers, artists, prophetic, freedom-thinking types versus mindless village and organizational castle types: is not reality more subtle and nuanced? I mention the above not to dismiss *Thomas Merton on Franz Kafka* but simply to note that the four reflections are not really about Kafka, only in a limited way about *The Castle* and mostly about concerns Merton legitimately had about his ethos and time. *The Castle* is merely a useful metaphor and portal for Merton into the malaise and dilemmas of much modern religion both in its theoretical and applied realities. The reflections are certainly worth the hearing but Merton, like a poetic and creative rabbit and light-footed fox, does run in all sorts of directions but rarely stops long enough to engage Kafka, Camus, Pascal, Sartre, Fromm, Mumford and many other thinkers of worth and note that he mentions in a hasty passing.