

Merton, Monasticism and Religious Pluralism [CM05705] Fall 2006 Paul R. Dekar

I. Description: an introduction to the monastic life. The course includes a week's retreat December 4-8 either the Abbey of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky, or Knob's Haven, the Sisters of Loretto Mother House in Nerinx, Kentucky. Lectures focus on the Benedictine tradition, Thomas Merton (1915-68) and issues with which Merton wrestled: feminism, race, peace, technology and Buddhism.

II. Texts:

Joan Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily. Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today* (Harper, 1991)

Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed. *Thomas Merton, Spiritual Master. The Essential Writings* (Paulist, 1992)

Laurence Freeman, *Jesus, the Teacher within* (Continuum, 2002)

Prevallet, Elaine M., *Interconnections* (Pendle Hill Pamphlet 261)

Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton. His Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999)

Judith Sutura, *Work of God. Benedictine Prayer* (Liturgical Press, 1997)

Optional

Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict. Insights for the Ages* (Crossroad, 1996)

Thich Nhat Hanh, *Essential Writings*, ed. Robert Ellsberg (Orbis, 2001)

III. Assignments:

- seminar: I expect you to have read widely and to come to each class session with a 2-page paper to read to the class; reflections on theme or question of the session in dialogue with Merton and other monastic writers (35% course grade). A major part of each evening will be given to prayer.
- retreat at Gethsemani or the Sisters of Loretto Mother House December 4-8 (35% course grade).
- reflection paper (2500 words), art, writing such as poetry, liturgy, meditation guide or other creative presentation due Wednesday December 13. (30% course grade)

IV. Classes: themes of papers

1. August 30: Introduction to Merton, Cunningham, intro - 106
2. September 6: who is Jesus for you, Merton and other monastic writers? Cunningham, 107-164, Freeman Intro, Ch 1-2
3. September 13: what is the importance of lectio for you, Merton and other monastic writers? Cunningham 421-431; Sutura

4. September 20: for Merton, other spiritual writers and yourself, how is friendship with Jesus sustained?
Cunningham 368-398; Freeman, Ch 3
5. September 27: what are the gospels for you and for monastic writers? Freeman Ch 4
6. October 4: how do you and monastic writers experience forgiveness? Freeman Ch 6
7. October 11: how did Merton, and how do you relate to traditions other than your own? Cunningham 223-237 399-420; Hahn (selected)
8. October 18: what is conversion for you and monastic writers? Freeman Ch 8
9. October 25: who is Spirit for you and monastic writers? Freeman Ch 9
10. November 1: describe the place of meditation in monastic spirituality and your own, Cunningham 241-293; Freeman Ch 10
11. November 8: what does it mean for you, Merton and other monastic writers to claim one's true self?
Cunningham 294-355
12. November 15: describe the possible value of the monastic life for you and other lay people, Chittister, Prevallet
13. November 29, is social action possible from a monastic spiritual perspective? Cunningham, 165-222
14. December 4-8 retreat

V. Personal note: We all have a short list of key spiritual guides and teachers. In my case, I first started reading Merton's books in the early 1960s. This led me to my first monastic retreat in upstate New York in 1965, and I have assigned Merton's writings in courses since the early 1980s.

This is the sixth time I have offered this course at Gethsemani. We will be there on December 10, thirty-six years to the day after Merton (and Karl Barth) died. Merton was in Thailand for a conference of Catholic and Buddhist monks. In his conference address that day, he said, "The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures, just as these students identify themselves essentially as people who have taken up a critical attitude toward the contemporary world and its structures... what is essential in the monastic life ... is total inner transformation purity of heart." (Asian Journal 329, 340).

This perspective shapes this course. Those who are professed monks are relatively few. Yet more and more pilgrims are finding their way to settings such as Gethsemani and Loretto as a kind of compass. As well, third-order monasticism (Cistercian Lay Contemplatives, Benedictine Oblates, Third Order Franciscans) is flourishing. Wherever you are on your spiritual journey, I believe Merton, Chittister and others you meet during this course can be helpful companions on your journey to God. My deepest prayer for you is that, through the sharpening of intellect, the deepening of your desire for healing, both personal and in the world, and the strengthening of practices of prayer and contemplation, this course may enable you may experience a deeper love of God, inner

transformation, purity of heart and a clarity of call as you seek to minister to others in the name of Christ.

This course highlights another dimension of contemporary monasticism, the encounter of east and west. Merton's writings after 1958 (the year of his epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville; see Cunningham anthology, 144-45) brought him to a deeper identification with humanity and led him to become an agent for justice, race reconciliation, peace and Christian-Buddhist dialogue. His meetings with D. T. Suzuki, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama and other Buddhists bore fruit in writings that prompted the zen scholar Suzuki to identify Merton as the leading interpreter of Asian religions in the west.

You will be on private retreat. We are guests in communities at the heart of which are prayer and service. Pack simply. Though the monastic life is structured, you will freedom to structure the time as you will. You may also choose to have conversation with one of the monks or nuns. Each evening, starting with an orientation Monday night, the spiritual director at Gethsemani gives a talk for all retreatants. He is available if you seek a personal time of spiritual direction. I have arranged a group meeting at Loretto Wednesday afternoon. Weather permitting, I will walk through the fields in the late afternoon and be available to talk. You are welcome to let me know of any emergency. The nearest medical resources are at Bardstown. However, I do not encourage travel. Gethsemani is famous for its cheese, fruitcake and fudge that you may purchase nearby.

VI. Odds and ends:

While there is no formal charge, I suggest a minimal donation of \$100. The six at Loretto can work in lieu of making a donation (e.g. help in kitchen). Men at Gethsemani may help the brothers during the mornings.

Student Handbook: class attendance, late work, academic misconduct, grading, and other policies apply.

Professor's scheduled office hours: before class or by appointment. Generally, I will be in my office each morning Monday-Friday. The second Monday of each month I attend a faculty meeting at 10:00 a.m.

Bibliography: Our library, the libraries at Gethsemani and Loretto, as well as most bookstores have more than adequate resources.