

REVIEWS

ENCOUNTER: THOMAS MERTON AND D. T. SUZUKI

Edited with an Introduction by Robert E. Daggy
Monterey, Kentucky: Larkspur Press, 1988
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Reviewed by **Daniel J. O'Hanlon, S.J.**

The first volume of Merton's collected letters (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William H. Shannon, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985) showed us how extensive and how diverse was Merton's correspondence, particularly in the last few years of his life. But even though this volume is a fat one (669 pages), and four more volumes are projected, this will necessarily remain only a partial selection from the vast corpus of Merton's letters. Besides, they do not provide us with the other side of the correspondence, the letters to Merton from those to whom he wrote.

This little book is the most recent of several which fill that gap by publishing the complete exchange of available letters with a single person, in this case, Merton and Daisetz T. Suzuki. Something similar has already been done for Merton's correspondence with Pasternak (*Pasternak / Merton: Six Letters*, ed. Carolyn Hammer, King Library, University of Kentucky); Robert Lax (*A Catch of Anti-Letters*, 1978); Ad Reinhardt ("Five Unpublished Letters from Ad Reinhardt to Thomas Merton and Two in Return," *Artforum*, 1978); Abraham Joshua Heschel (in *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process*, 1983); Henry Miller (ed. David D. Cooper, in *Helix*, 1984); and W. H. "Ping" Ferry (*Letters from Tom*, privately printed in 1984).

In addition to all the available letters between Merton and Suzuki, this book contains the account from Merton's journals of how their meeting in New York came about, what it was like, and reflections after the meeting was over. Interestingly enough, these afterthoughts are focused

more on the experience of New York City, his old stomping grounds, after two decades of absence, than on the actual exchange with Suzuki. Of New York, he exclaims: "I am faithful to her. I have not ceased to love her to the last gasp of this ballpoint pen."

As to the meeting itself: these two well-known figures were both men of serious and mature spiritual practice and also skilled and prolific writers. For some time before their brief meeting in New York in June of 1964, both of them had been eager to meet each other. Merton, having already read many of Suzuki's books had written to Suzuki five years before the actual meeting occurred. He set the tone of their relationship in his first letter. Merton had a gift (and it stands out even more dramatically in the first volume of the collected letters, where one reads a series of collected letters to one correspondent immediately after another) for adapting himself to his correspondent. If one were to read his letters to Bob Lax, for instance, and then the letters to Abdul Aziz, one might almost believe that the letters had been written by two different people. Yet neither set of letters seems phony or contrived. It is as though Merton had in himself so many facets of his personality that each person to whom he wrote brought out a different, but genuine, aspect of that many-sided personality. Some of the parts of himself which were evoked in the exchange with Suzuki were a capacity for reverence and respect in the presence of wisdom and holiness, which shows in the language and style of the letters; a sensitivity to the way in which common shared experiences get expressed in quite different vocabularies; a modesty about his understanding of Zen, yet a sense of great at-homeness with it; a childlike eagerness to share selectively his own writings with people he respected; and an unambiguous confession of his own Christian faith and monastic vocation, which leads him to conclude his opening letter to the Buddhist, non-theist Suzuki with "the hope that we may commend one another to God each in his own way," and "Faithfully yours in Christ."

Both Suzuki and Merton, though they wrote extensively about Zen and about contemplation, were convinced that the essential is regular spiritual *practice*. Suzuki: "To grasp Zen thoroughly a certain course of discipline is needed along with the reading knowledge of Chinese and Japanese literature on the subject." Merton: "We in the West are always ready to talk about things like Zen and about a-hundred-and-one other things besides, but we are not so eager to do the things that Zen implies; and that is what really counts." Merton acknowledges in 1959 that he lacks

actual Zen experience, but he points to his own kind of Zen Master, whom he occasionally meets "in passing, and for a brief moment. For example, the other day a bluebird sitting on a fence post suddenly took off after a wasp, dived for it, missed, and instantly returned to the fence as if nothing had happened. A brief split second lesson in Zen." Merton's journals, especially after he moved into the hermitage, are full of his Zen-like fascination with the flight and sound of birds.

Probably Suzuki was less acquainted with Christian vocabulary, theology and experience than Merton was with these same aspects of Zen, but Merton has no hesitation in thanking Suzuki "for your deeply moving and profoundly true intuitions on Christianity . . . we have very much the same views." At the same time, he wants to protect Suzuki from unwarranted criticism from Christian theologians who will not understand the language Suzuki uses. He warns him that "If you say, 'This is Christianity,' you will immediately hear a thousand voices shout, 'This is not Christianity.' Which would be very sad since, in fact, what you say *is* Christianity, and yet it is probably hard to express it in a way that would convince many Christians of its true nature."

Merton's first response (April 11, 1959) to Suzuki's first letter (March 31, 1959), and Merton's letter after receiving Suzuki's first article are the richest commentary of Merton on Zen in all their exchange of letters. Merton comments especially on Suzuki's understanding of Christianity expressed in five short Zen-like paradoxes. Sample: "We are innocent just because of our sinfulness." Merton is impatient with the preoccupation with formulas which he finds among Christians: "No one cares for fresh, direct, and sincere intuitions of the Living Truth." Of the attitude of the Western world to the East: "If only we had thought of coming to *learn* something."

As is still usual at the present stage of Buddhist-Christian inter-religious dialogue, the primary initiative in this case also comes from the Christian side. Suzuki indeed responded favorably to Merton's invitation to exchange, but Merton's part in the dialogue is longer, more detailed, and more enthusiastic than that of Suzuki. Of course, it needs to be remembered that Suzuki was nearly ninety years old when the exchange began, and it seems that some letters from the exchange may be missing. But the last short letter we have from Suzuki says: "We are destined to differ. The only thing we can do in the circumstances is to be tolerant toward each other." This letter was written five years *before* their actual meeting in New

York. Perhaps he felt differently after the encounter, but we have no evidence to tell us that.

A niggling detail: The title of Part II of the book, the account from Merton's journals, seems slightly imprecise. It refers to the text as "Merton's unpublished journals." Actually, much of this material has already, though very recently, been published in *A Vow of Conversation* — a result of Vow's appearing before *Encounter* when it was actually scheduled for publication after it.

If some future edition could include the dialogue between Merton and Suzuki which grew out of the essay which Suzuki, at Merton's invitation, wrote to serve as a preface to Merton's *Wisdom of the Desert* (material which is now found in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*), then all the primary data on this exchange and meeting of Merton and Suzuki would be conveniently in one place. Meanwhile, this handsomely printed addition to Mertoniana sheds useful light on the dialogue between these two widely read religious and literary figures of our century.

THE MERTON TAPES

Initial Release of Lectures by Thomas Merton
 Kansas City, Missouri: Credence Cassettes, 1988
 19 cassette tapes [60 minutes each] -- \$7.95 each

Reviewed by **Victor A. Kramer**

Cassian laid down a fundamental rule: "What we would like to be at the time of prayer, let us prepare to be before [the time of] prayer."

(Tape AA2069)

Throughout these lectures Merton refers to the vocation of being a Christian and, particularly, of the monastic vocation. While his lecture subjects vary widely the core of his concern remains how one best seeks God. Thus, while he may be explaining some fine point of history, tradition, scripture or monastic usage, Merton's focus remains on the essence of the