

contemplative calling, which had attracted him into the Trappist Order in the first place, continued to attract him up until his death in 1968 — even if certain aspects of his earlier attitudes were later abandoned.

For this reason it is salutary to bear in mind that even if, as Cooper rightly argues, Merton arrived at a Christian humanism “relevant to modern realities,” an important part of that relevance relates to his writings about the universal need for contemplative solitude. In particular, as Merton wrote to Daniel Berrigan, if the Christian was correct in confronting secular powers on significant moral issues, the Christian activist must prior to such action, withdraw for a time from organizing protest in order to bury himself in the mind of God. This was not only Christian but monastic humanism — of a sort which only a cenobite who had separated himself from the world could articulate.

I should not like these modest reservations about Cooper’s book to cast a shadow over it. Compared with the many books which have been published about Merton in recent years, I would say that this is one of the strongest and most original both in conception and structuring. Thomas Merton is one of the most mercurial and elusive figures, both in his life and in his writings, to have emerged in this century. That Cooper’s book throws a fresh and distinctive light on Merton there can be no doubt.

Anthony T. Padovano

CONSCIENCE & CONFLICT:

A Trilogy of One-Actor Plays:

Thomas Merton, Pope John XXIII, Martin Luther

New York / Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988

xii, 102 pages — \$7.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Richard Moir**

I found *Conscience & Conflict* by Anthony Padovano an inspiration. As an actor with the desire for what might be described as a “theater of the spirit,” I have found that this trilogy of one-actor plays achieves what all

good theater, film or television must achieve — that is, its whole be greater than the sum of its parts. I approached the trilogy with a fair knowledge of Thomas Merton, a slight acquaintance with Luther and hardly any awareness of Pope John XXIII. To say that my understanding of, and feeling for, these three “rebels” of the Catholic Church has increased would be an understatement.

Padovano states in his introduction that drama is less passive than a book or a lecture and indeed I believe strongly that the time is fast approaching when we shall be seeing *The Seven Storey Mountain* on television or, even better, on the big screen. Drama, as Padovano explains, is about magic and mystery. There is a latitude in the creation of drama which allows the protagonist's path of personal growth to be charted and plotted as in no other form. Because the life journeys of Merton, Luther and John are seen so very clearly in this collection, it follows that the presentation of the plays on stage, their intended purpose, would be a most entertaining and inspiring night at the theater.

What is most interesting about these three “solitary human journeys” is their very marked similarity. Each monologue begins with the seed of an inner conflict and for each man this conflict is the same. In *Winter Rain*, Thomas Merton mourns the death of his mother but, more than that, he mourns the fact that she would not let him near her. There was not even a farewell embrace, just a letter between mother and son explaining her approaching death. This single event colored Merton's life and because this is drama and Merton is “speaking” to an audience then that audience is able readily to comprehend the interpretation that Merton became a writer in order to gain the embrace of the world. The play also suggests that Merton became a monk in order to write. So it is seen that Merton's twin vocations grew out of this early dilemma — a lack of demonstrable love from his mother.

In *His Name is John*, Angelo Guiseppe Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII carries an image of his earthly father hoisting the young Angelo on to his shoulders to catch a passing parade. He states: “I looked often for another father — not to supplant mine, only to supplement a little.” He says later that he never knew his father and in his speech to the Conclave speaks of his mother, Marianna, and the great dilemma he faced in not coming home to see her one more time before she died. “She waited and waited, an advent with no Christmas, expectation without birth, longing and no rejoicing.” Later in the speech he confesses that he cannot get to God without going through his mama and papa. So Pope John's story is influ-

enced throughout with the connections between fathers and sons, mothers and orphans. He wonders what matters more — doctrine or parents: “The world calls me father though I feel like an orphan.”

In *Summer Lightning*, Martin Luther is obsessed with his earthly father. His earliest memories are the beatings he received. “A kind father is not easy to come by, on earth or in Heaven.” But he accepted this: “My father at least paid attention to me. I never pleased him but even his displeasure was better than my mother’s indifference.” Later he states: “I shall become a loyal son if only I can find the right father.” The play suggests that Luther became a priest to find a father. Going against his earthly father’s wishes, “he tried to invent himself to make himself his own creator.”

The relationship between child and parent has an important resonance in the lives of each of these “church outsiders.” In a dramatic context and from the point of view of an actor, this leads to an interesting possibility — that *Conscience & Conflict* is perhaps three scenarios with essentially one character. While I am not suggesting that Merton, Pope John and Luther are not three unique individuals, I am suggesting that their presentation in this collection would be best served by being played by one actor and preferably all in one performance. Their stories echo and mirror one another in such a way as to show the universality of the lifelong quest for meaning and peace. By treating the trilogy as “one” I believe this important message of the plays would become apparent and, very importantly, *Conscience & Conflict* would be seen as a strong piece of theater.

It is not only similar parental problems and influences that create this idea of three parts of a whole. Merton, John and Luther were all essentially outsiders and rebels. They all went against the established grain of the Church of the day and they all faced up to the question of social justice. Merton saw a link between holiness and human passion. He wanted to know why he found “a compatibility between things my church tells me I should find incompatible.” He was a monk who was to follow a rule of silence but who would not shut up. In the world of Vietnam and nuclear weapons, he wanted to achieve peace. On his Christian journey, he found Buddhism bringing him closer to God. Through it all he kept writing and growing in the face of disapproval and censorship from church authorities.

In the course of his life, Pope John “made popes angry, lit candles for Bulgaria, removed walls in Turkey and saved twenty-four thousand Jews.” He entertained Communists and produced “Pacem in Terris” — a letter on peace. His convening of the Second Vatican Council met, at first, with silent

disapproval from his Cardinals. Martin Luther burned a papal bull in public and nailed his ninety-five theses to a church door in Wittenberg. From being a celibate monk, he married and had children. He was responsible for the beginnings of a reformed church. There is a line from *Winter Rain* which I think sums up these three very human and holy men: "When you don't cause trouble in a world as troubled as today's world, you're in trouble."

So the similarities between the three subjects in *Conscience & Conflict* obviously suggest that they be treated as a whole with one actor perhaps portraying all three. This, of course, would be a mighty task and something of a problem. The "monologue" is often an area of theater in which it is hard to sustain audience interest. There is no interaction between characters and, apart from lighting and some costume changes, we have only the voice and the words. I have read other plays using a similar method of portrayal (including some on Merton) and I know that just the voice and the words would not be enough in these plays to make them theatrical events. I have no such worry with *Conscience & Conflict*. There are scenes here capable of creating strong emotions and thought: Martin Luther grieving over the death of his daughters; Merton talking about "Margaret," the woman whom he "would cry for at night but not go to at night;" the simple love of John as he visits the children's hospital. As an actor, the thought of playing any one of these men, let alone all of them, would be a very fulfilling challenge.

Above all, these plays are the stories of men who possess the courage to face up to the conflict both within and without their lives. As Padovano says:

To struggle with the same issues as they did is to suffer pain with them but also to achieve liberation and peace. All three plays conclude on a tranquil note. Is there anything more we could ask for our Church and for each of our lives?