

---

James Terrence Fisher

*THE CATHOLIC COUNTERCULTURE  
IN AMERICA: 1933-1962*

Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989  
305 pages — \$24.95 hardcover

Ross Labrie

*THE WRITINGS OF DANIEL BERRIGAN*

Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1989  
273 pages — \$32.50 hardcover

Reviewed by **Victor A. Kramer**

---

To be reminded that thoughtfulness has never been a strong characteristic of modern Catholicism, but especially of Roman Catholicism in the United States in the twentieth century is to be reminded that to be part of the "Catholic Counterculture" is truly to be marginalized. As primarily an emigrant church and as a group of believers who have somehow always had to find appropriate ways to react to the dominant culture, one basic method has been to accept dogma and teaching without apparently much question. A willingness to accept the tradition and teaching of the Church has, of course, tremendous advantages because it is possible to feel comfortable in the arms of Mother Church. But what does one do when the Mother seems no longer to pay much attention to her children who are ever more thoughtful and indeed, finally, insistent upon getting answers to questions which seem to be quite imperative? What does one do when, all of a sudden, one's radical attempts to be Christian (in the most catholic of senses) cause one to be at odds with the Church?

As we have learned during the quarter century since Vatican II the Church is slow to endorse certain kinds of questions and perhaps the clearest areas proven to be problematic are areas of conscience, especially with regard to war and peace. While one easily sees the need for theory about wars (just and unjust) it is rather more difficult to act (or endorse others' actions) when it comes to the particulars of any particular war. Merton's difficulties in securing permission to write and publish about the

Vietnam War is a clear recent example of such slowness. Theory is fine as long as things remain in neat categories. However, it seems, a monk is considered best when silent, and for a monastic to speak out of his contemplative spirit on subjects such as nuclear war can be problematic. Yet we, and the church, also know that contemplation often leads to action. Action becomes absolutely necessary when we realize the true nature of the marginalized. Above all it does finally mean that one has a responsibility to speak — yet given the nature of the dominant culture and because the Catholic subculture is already at the margin, then we see that the stories provided here by James Terrence Fisher and Ross Labrie become, fundamentally, narratives of courage and frustration. Both books are valuable studies. Each remains somewhat limited in what it can accomplish because of the magnitude chosen for investigation. What these books do provide are valuable roadmaps for further study of two important and interrelated subjects — counterculture Catholicism as it itself merges with the mainstream.

These books are analyses of what can occur when writers, activists, questioners embrace the traditional patterns of belief basic to the Church, yet also keep pushing and thinking and imagining a society at the margin which could be radically different than either the comfortable W.A.S.P. mainline (a culture which is slowly slowing down!) or a wing of the universal church unable to speak (very loudly) because such responsibility had not been much encouraged in the past. Obviously, when such new patterns begin to emerge, then some interesting changes also appear. For example, Fisher traces how Merton moved away from his earlier “fussy scrupulosity” and became interested in a “deeper spirituality which transcended denominational boundaries” (p. 241).

In some fundamental ways all the figures examined in these books might best be called prophets, prophets of a time yet to come when more Catholics will have the courage to act with their convictions. That's the real story here — Dorothy Day, Merton, Daniel Berrigan and others — spokespersons for a vision of the culture which goes against its predictable grains: these are figures who see that their roles as prophets make it necessary to be aware of both the dominant culture and their own decisions to break away from the dominance by also using certain aspects of Catholic identity to surprise, shock, and question not just the dominant culture, but (as well) the very Catholicism (sometimes still unthinking) which is at the core of their lives. In a sense all these figures are, to use James Terrence Fisher's terminology, “fools for Christ.” Yet what we also realize is that one learns to

be careful when one has Mother Church, or the hierarchy, or the Abbot General looking over one's shoulder. In the concluding chapter of Fisher's *Catholic Counterculture* he mentions Merton's aghast reaction and decision to disassociate himself from the "peace group . . . endorsing self-violence" after the death of Roger La Porte in 1965. That year is beyond the dates inclusive for Fisher's study, yet it remains a significant moment in Thomas Merton's intellectual history, one of continually establishing a middle ground between two countercultures.

Both of these books are competent analyses of their subjects, yet both, of their nature, are somewhat limited in scope and (thereby) accomplishment. The title *Catholic Counterculture in America: 1933-1962* suggests that somehow Fisher would have been able to provide a synthesis and analysis of an immense movement which must have involved not just the few figures he studies here, but literally thousands of people in parishes, dioceses, colleges, the media, and elsewhere. If this is the whole story, which of course it isn't, then we are really dealing with an extremely marginalized group. As an extremely important part of the total story, Fisher's historical investigation provides much valuable information. The first three chapters of the book are about Dorothy Day's conversion; the Catholic Worker Movement (1933-1949); and "Catholic Workers and Catholic Culture."

No doubt Day did play a quite significant role "as a sign of contradiction" within the history of American Catholicism. Here was a woman, with great talent, who knew all the important literary people of her day, who as convert started *both* a monthly tabloid newspaper, *The Catholic Worker*, and a movement for social justice which was rooted in care for the homeless and the unemployed. Peter Maurin, a stranger person than Day, served as the inspiration for much of what she did. Maurin "by his own lights [was] a reactionary who viewed Western history since the fifteenth century as a disastrous mistake" (p. 38). His "personalism" and Day's intensity set the stage for the unfolding of the Catholic Worker Movement. Some of what Fisher chronicles, as Day's celebratory status unfolded, is quite interesting, yet also a bit surprising. He writes:

Day actually paid a high price for becoming a celebrity with such an intransigent, male-dominated institution. Spellman's biographer noted that the Cardinal shrewdly realized that censuring Dorothy Day would create more problems that it would solve, and that he also once remarked: "She might be a saint." But in practice Day's tenuous status within the Church required that she tell the priests what they wanted to hear . . .

(p. 60)

The fact is, and Fisher brings much evidence to bear, the Church often prefers a more conventional kind of ally than Day seemed to be. She "promoted self-immolation even against clerical supporters who wanted a more conventional crusader" (p. 61).

What Fisher also makes clear, however, is the Catholic Worker Movement "was radical only so far as it was radically Catholic" (p. 71). Thus there were some real conflicts, for example, between Day and Father Coughlin, the priest famous for his radio broadcasts in the 1930s. Day's variety of sacrifice hardly allowed any promise of comfort this side of death. Coughlin (and I think to some degree some of the other figures studied by Fisher) sought to find ways *both* to be Catholic and to accommodate himself to whatever seemed to be the need(s) of the moment. In a strange kind of way, therefore, it is all right to be counterculture if one is not too much anti-culture at the same time. But Day certainly never meant that one could be radically Catholic and also somehow be assimilated into the rather predictable patterns of the middle class. Fisher and Labrie remind us that figures such as Day, Merton, and Berrigan developed peculiar "counterculture" visions and expressed their convictions, yet were not co-opted by those who might provide their qualified blessings.

Much of what Day and Peter Maurin stressed was a call to radical Catholics to embrace suffering. However, Fisher points out within the context of the Depression, and the very real threats of economic deprivation, those who were attracted to Day through the Catholic Worker Movement, and later to other experiments, "yearned [as well] for the richer, more universal spirituality of the European Catholic renaissance, which spread to America\* [especially] in 1933 with the opening of Sheed and Ward's New York office" (p. 90). He notes:

The Sheeds specialized in translations of works of continental Catholic authors while also publishing an impressive list of original English works. Maisie Ward and Frank Sheed became close friends of Dorothy Day, and the *Catholic Worker* fervently promoted such previously obscure authors as Jacques Maritain and George Bernanos . . . . Maritain likened the romantic atmosphere of the Catholic Worker Movement to the exalted milieu of the Parisian Catholic *avant-garde* in the years following his conversion . . . . (p. 90)

These were exciting times, yet I think the real story here is the estrangement from power of those who sought to be intellectuals in the church. This has not exactly been the fate of Thomas Merton and Daniel Berrigan, but there would be an element of truth to such a generalization. Such facts are extremely significant. To Merton, as to many Catholics in the 1960s, it became quite difficult to reconcile being human with the authority of a

church which was once ground and center of their identity" (p. 245).

As demonstrated in the later chapters of Fisher's study, there were definite limits to how particular persons, or groups, could incorporate radical Christian action into their lives. In his investigation of *Integrity* magazine, founded in 1946; in his consideration of Thomas A. Dooley "and Romance of Catholic Anticommunism"; and in the analysis of Dooley's work in Laos and America (1956-1961), Fisher does successfully demonstrate that work on the fringe was having some effect on the center. But all these stories, when read in sequence, provide a telling record of marginality.

Two chapters on Dooley constitute some seventy-one pages of this study. Approximately forty-two pages are devoted to Chapter 7, "Jack Kerouac and Thomas Merton, the Last Catholic Romantics." This is to say little more than an overview can be provided about Merton's role. Parallels do exist between the French Canadian-stock Kerouac and Merton, the most important of which is, perhaps, that they both (despite various attempts to protest too much) were exceedingly articulate and ambitious writers who found in the church (nostalgically remembered by Kerouac; somewhat romantically created by Merton) a home and a triumphalistic system that provided an answer to the materialism of the dominant culture. Thoreau, Kerouac, and Merton are each romantic in such a view, yet only the first was content to keep a journal quietly and not worry about an audience.

Kerouac and Merton both went to Columbia University and both, in their later writings, became quite critical of the dominant culture. They shared acquaintances in the "beat movement." Both writers began their careers intensely desirous of traditional "literary careers." Perhaps the fact that they did not sustain such dreams allowed them to retreat to their marginal positions. Yet, of course, they both wrote and wrote and wrote, and, above all, they *both* did develop methods to integrate the sacred and the worldly. One of Fisher's points, however, is that as critics of their own earlier counterculture positions, Kerouac and Merton turned to Eastern wisdom because something seemed to be lacking in the Catholicism in which they sought to ground their faith. Clearly, Fisher argues,

For Thomas Merton, Eastern religions served not as a surrogate faith system but as a sign of his gradual rejection of Catholic triumphalism . . . . Merton's turn to the East signaled a new era of personal force and maturity. [His] pursuit of Eastern wisdom freed him from his role as exemplar of selfless Catholic obedience. (p. 229)

What Fisher demonstrates with regard to Merton, and indeed others, is that freedom, choice, responsibility could become, or seem to become, an

explosive issue. In Fisher's view Kerouac and Merton remain "romantics" and more or less cut off from the mainstream(s) — either of the Church or of the culture as a whole. This is exceedingly important, and we are finally aware that the radical (romantic) vision of the Church espoused by Day, Maurin, Merton and others was not easy to sustain within a culture so comfortable as the mid-1960s. Thirty years later, perhaps, we are becoming more aware of what should have been done to extend the vision of these counterculture types.

The beauty of what Daniel Berrigan has done with his life and writings seems in some basic ways to confirm the general thrust of Fisher's investigation. No one apparently told Daniel Berrigan that witness, protest, faith, service, action, submission, love are of little use in an often co-opted world of mediocrity. Labrie's study of Daniel Berrigan might well have been subtitled "The Truly Last of the American Romantics." Here is a study of a poet-priest-activist whose life, often mirrored in the thirty books he has published, has been one of constantly seeing the hope of a Christian life fulfilled in a society really not much concerned with radical commitment.

Labrie's book is essentially a literary study, yet many biographical details are provided and we come to understand why Berrigan has written so diversely and well. *The Writings of Daniel Berrigan* is quite a good analysis of the major work produced by Berrigan from the 1950s on. The early prose, Labrie argues in Chapter One, is often "superior in . . . matter and style." Walker Percy reviewed *The Bow in the Clouds* (1961) and indicated it manifested a "precision and abstemiousness which is as welcome as it is rare in modern religious literature" (p. 9). Labrie asserts that the first part of the book

focuses on God's relationship with man in Biblical history while the second half deals with Berrigan's vision of Christian humanism in the modern world. The connection between the two halves would seem to be in the emphasis upon man's imagination — a rainbow of sorts — in connecting man with God and God with the world. (p. 10)

The analysis of Berrigan's early "Teilhardian gnosticism" hopeful of man's future, celebratory of what he had done in a universe in which he had dominion over nature, is focused and clear. His early view is that prophets and saints approach the "beautiful things of the world with a penetrating sense of their underlying, spiritual reality" (p. 11). Yet already at this early time in his career, Labrie asserts, he was "shifting attention" from an endorsement of the Divinity as inherited within the Catholic tradition and becoming more and more aware that "'God is the victory of man,' nevertheless in this world divine love wears a 'face of divine suffering'" (p. 12).

Berrigan loves the Church and Labrie makes it quite clear that never does Berrigan turn his face away from the Church. But chapter by chapter with accurate analysis, Labrie demonstrates how the freshness in Berrigan's thought and language allows him to emphasize the social dimensions of religious knowledge. Finally this means that Berrigan insists "if it was true that humanity required the truths of Christianity in order to fulfill itself, it was equally true that God worked in the world beyond the boundaries of the formal church" (p. 13). This is to accept the reality of marginalization.

Labrie's book is organized with six chapters: "Early Prose"; "Early Poetry"; "Writer/ Activist"; "Underground and Prison Writings"; "The Nuclear Shadow"; and lastly "Placing the Writer." Labrie demonstrates that as literature the earlier work, perhaps, has more merit. His success is not just in that illustration, but rather in the analysis of how Berrigan has continued to write under adverse circumstances. Berrigan has become more outspoken about some of his colleagues who were, in Labrie's words, guilty of "moral slumbering." This became the subject of his concern in the 1970s, for example, when "although he praised Thomas Merton's mingling of monastic and social consciousness, Berrigan was also frequently disturbed by the social attitudes he encountered on visits to contemplative communities." Labrie quotes a Berrigan talk given to a convent of nuns:

[Some] were living in some war situation out of their own past or some conception of patriotism that was quite un-Christian. Then I began to notice, every time I went to a monastery after that, there were these same divisions among the monks — the same divisions we had outside . . . In becoming a monk, one is not always returning to a primitive, fresh understanding of religion. One may well be entering a parallel institution, parallel to the society. (p. 187)

This has the ring of an Old Testament prophet, and Berrigan's point is quite significant, yet shocking for the complacent and comfortable.

To be a true "fool for Christ," Berrigan reminds us, it is necessary to live and speak in ways which endorse suffering. Clearly he is convinced that by doing so he can serve as a catalyst for change within a culture often too smug with its own satisfactions. "Embedded like a thorn in the bosom of his Church and of his society, Berrigan continues as a writer to provoke controversy in a number of areas" (p. 241). We suspect that if Merton were alive he would be fascinated by Berrigan, in a sense his own student, yet a student who has gone beyond his teacher. As a spiritual writer he has evolved through stages, moving from triumphant Christianity to more and more explicit concern with the third world, blatant injustice, etc. Berrigan in the 1970s and 1980s made himself "accessible to those who had become alienated by either secular or religious institutionalism" (p. 242).



Labrie's book does an excellent job of demonstrating the many changes in Berrigan's career. Because, however, Berrigan has published so much, been involved in so many activities as peace protester, etc., Labrie's groundbreaking analysis leaves room for more detailed examination. Especially the poetry and the autobiographical writing of Berrigan might be more intensely focused upon. When that is done in the future, it may be that Berrigan will be understood to have been radically successful as priest-artist within a predominantly non-religious culture.

---

### BUDDHIST EMPTINESS & CHRISTIAN TRINITY

Edited by Roger Corless & Paul F. Knitter  
 New York: Paulist Press, 1990  
 109 pages — \$8.95 paperback

Chwen Jiuan A. Lee & Thomas G. Hand

### A TASTE OF WATER:

*Christianity through Taoist-Buddhist Eyes*

New York: Paulist Press, 1990  
 224 pages — \$9.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Bonnie B. Thurston**

---

*The Merton Annual* is an appropriate place to review works on the dialogue between Christianity and Eastern religions because the subject was important to Merton. Indeed, he may be best remembered in academic circles for his contributions to the early stages of the Buddhist-Christian dialogue. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and some of the essays in *Mystics and Zen Masters* were seminal and are now classic works in the field.

The two works for consideration, *Buddhist Emptiness and Christian Trinity*, edited by Roger Corless and Paul F. Knitter, and *A Taste of Water* by Chwen Jiuan A. Lee and Thomas G. Hand, approach the dialogue from the scholarly and experiential perspectives respectively. These two approaches were both employed by Merton, and in the present case present a balanced and interesting view to the reader concerned about comparative religious