

REVIEWS

Thomas Merton
THE MERTON TAPES

[Third Series] Third Release of Lectures

Kansas City, Missouri: Credence Cassettes, 1990 & 1991
 Eighteen cassette tapes [sixty minutes each] - \$7.95 each.

Reviewed by Victor A. Kramer

With this group of classroom lectures, a total of sixty-seven tapes have been released by Credence Cassettes. Merton loved to teach and it shows. In this particular release of eighteen tapes, half include materials which were previously published earlier by Electronic Paperbacks and are here combined with newly released lectures as well. This review-essay, like those published in preceding volumes of *The Merton Annual*, will analyze these diverse lectures according to their interrelationships in subject matter. This analysis is divided into two parts—first a consideration of tapes which include mostly materials which have been re-released and those lectures which are completely fresh.

Nine tapes constitute the first grouping which includes the previously released material. These nine tapes all deal in fundamental ways with prayer and questions about the knowledge of God. In the set of lectures to be considered first (AA2259-AA2264) we observe Father Louis successfully building toward a consideration of how to perfect one's prayer life. In AA2264, "The Mystical Life," (both sides of which were previously published) Merton draws on his knowledge of Sufism, Hasidic stories, as well as his correspondence with A. Reza Arasteh to demonstrate how the mystical life is a matter not so much of mystery but of "final integration."

Merton's combination of enthusiasm which flows out of his own reading, study, reflections, and correspondence boils over into these broad considerations about the mystical life so we literally hear him making connections which can be both mundane and transcendental. He assures his listeners that "monastic life is forcing through to new territory" as in research, but he also reminds them that such a fact requires long grappling, hard work, often long waiting which can (sometimes in a flash) represent a "breakthrough." The second lecture of this tape (perhaps a week later?) does not at first seem to be directly related, but basic connections are provided within its thirty or so minutes: this relaxed teacher stresses that "life is not a consistent project of doing good." Life, and thus "mystical life," requires that we must accept ourselves, set a course; paradoxically, this means forgetting about the self so one can then enter a higher realm.

In AA2259, largely about the "Spirituality of the Our Father," Merton uses Tertullian and Cassian to analyze the Lord's Prayer. Many striking insights about the petitions of the prayer are provided as Merton reminds his listeners that in a monastery there is "the need paradoxically [to] remain spiritually famished" so that one will remain totally oriented toward God.

While such reflections might seem more or less obvious, they are tossed off here as both erudite and valuable. Above all, Merton reminds us that when we pray the "Our Father" we earnestly must be willing to practice forgiveness and to be aware, constantly, of our *un-preparedness*.

Similar themes are developed throughout "Prayer and Self-Growth" (AA2260). To be successful in "prayer and self-growth" Merton states "You cannot start anywhere but with [your] self." Here again significant connections are made—perhaps most interestingly in terms of Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of Merton's favorites, and in relation to Hopkins's term "inscape" which reminds Merton of the "structure of individual being." In the second lecture of this cassette two "dialogues" of Desert Fathers, about distraction, are analyzed. AA2261, "The Response of the Creature," is directly related. (In this instance, as with several of these first nine cassettes, only one lecture, here the first, is previously published.) Merton's subject on AA2261 is St. Irenaeus and suffering. As creatures, Merton reminds his fellow monks, we must remember humankind "is a possibility of growth" yet Irenaeus (and Meister Eckhart, and Zen Masters, Merton urges) are all aware that our immediate relationship with God can be easily blocked. This

happens when humankind considers itself "an autonomous object." Merton's best example is the fiction of Ayn Rand. The remark about Rand is an aside but because of its spontaneity it is in many ways one of the best items here.

So many of these lectures are about how we should develop the Christian life, but Merton insists that this must be done in context. Thus (on side B of AA2261) he will use ancient Irish monastic stories as well as insights from Eckhart and Tauler to remind students that a life of prayer today allows one to select the ground of our being ("the spark, center, core"), his metaphors for the needed simple direct way of being which is any Christian life. St. Ireneus, Merton reminds his students, says "The glory of God is living man," and "Opus Dei" is, of course, praise. Merton's job is to keep reminding these students of such simple facts.

"Prayer: The Search for Inner Rest" (AA2262) uses early commentators on prayer to explain the value of "The Jesus Prayer." Both Lectures (sides A and B) build on the idea of how each tiny part of each life plays a role in the search for peace, or its opposite. At the beginning of the second tape, before the class proper, Merton talks some about an acquaintance of his whom he considers a "very holy person." (He is referring to Hildegard Goss-Mayr who had recently visited the Abbey.) This leads into a discussion of the function of "The Jesus Prayer" historically and for the present moment. Earlier he discussed the purpose of "The Jesus Prayer," a quite practical method "to give, rest in our heart." Merton stresses that the simplicity of this traditional prayer "allows us to get at the heart of the Christian mystery." "Trinity, Spirit, it's all there!"

The related lectures (AA2263) "Prayer of Joy and Sorrow" incorporate meditations about St. Arsenius (who was always bursting into tears when he perceived the differences between the way things are and the way they should be!) which allow Merton to demonstrate what's wrong with man, especially modern man, whose fundamental sin is "idolatry." Merton insists "we are up to our ears in idolatry everywhere: it isn't just products, but you see it everywhere." "Every ad is an act of idolatry." Using rather esoteric sources to begin this class, he then makes connections with Bernard and William of St. Thierry, and thereby demonstrates how we must strive for completeness and integration. On this tape there also are many valuable references to Sufi theology. Merton stresses the need for contentment "in your own heart," yet such a time is precisely when you have to learn you may "have to be able to get along without having things the way we [sic] prefer them."

This group of six tapes, as here published, provides in essence a short twelve part course in prayer, and demonstrates that Merton constantly wants his listeners to know they have a responsibility to prepare for their own spiritual lives. Each person must learn to know when to act, but here too, Merton points out there is also a fundamental paradox: we have to learn to live in the present, but we have to know what to do and not do: "if I do what I have to do now, then everything is taken care of." Merton's commentary is built on the Greek word "Kairos." What he subtly tells his students is that they must both get ready and be ready!

In the three sets of tapes to be considered next (AA2265 through AA2267) the subjects are "Sufism: Knowledge of God" and "Sufism: The Desire for God" as well as "The True and False Self." These lectures flow out of all of the preceding. In this material, which also serves as a modest introduction to Islam, Merton demonstrates how the simplicity of Moslem belief, while altogether different than Christian (No salvation history; no saviour!) provides great insight into what all Christians need to do. Merton shows that what may seem extreme in Islam could assist a Christian to focus. "Everyone should try to be a witness of God's love, mercy, and compassion" and as Christians we should be on a daily basis. These lectures about the Sufis are extremely insightful—ecumenical Merton at his best. AA 2265 and AA2266, previously available, work beautifully therefore as part of this total sequence and as a kind of counter-song for Merton, as a Christian monastic who can demonstrate how all can develop their prayer lives.

AA2267 "The True and False Self" goes the next step—which is to say—if we are to locate our true self, we must strip away what is false forever. The self we project, to and for others, is sometimes not us. One is reminded of Walker Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos*. Man is lost precisely because he has become too concerned about others and has lost sight of his truest inner self. In these nine cassettes Merton cumulatively shows his listeners that as individuals they must develop techniques for stripping away the unessential. Of course this is a lifelong process, and just as in the classes he teaches such a life requires backtracking, repetition, reiteration. A problem with these tapes is that if one listens to one, or a few, in isolation, Merton's insights and witty remarks remain few in number within any thirty-minute sequence. One really has to listen and listen and listen!

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The same is true of the remaining lectures. In AA2268 "The Irish Tradition of Mysticism" we hear Merton again going back to the

early roots of Western monasticism to provide good insights about today's contemplative life. Clearly what he sees and admires are earlier, simpler, and far more direct appreciations of man's role in relation to God. In all of the lectures surveyed within the remainder of this review-essay Merton's insights about how humankind focuses upon religious intuition remain basic. Often he sounds as if he might be teaching an introductory class in humanities.

The title for the first set of lectures, not previously released, is however, really not appropriate for it is hardly about the "Irish tradition" of mysticism. Rather it is one more interesting classroom exercise, and in fact that would be the best way to describe all of the material (on both sides of AA2268) in this set, and indeed the bulk of the recordings remaining to be commented upon here. Merton, over and over, guides his students through theology and literature so they might come around to a better understanding of themselves at this moment in history.

While this particular cassette may be mistitled, it remains extremely interesting partly because it was recorded during the very week of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death, and within the context of correspondence by Merton about a possible visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani by King. Ironically, Merton reminds his listeners the "job" as a Christian is never "to fly from suffering." Many valuable experiential connections are made about the need for silence and acceptance of death: "Our silence is not just a means: it is a fruit of our union with God."

Another new tape (AA2367) consists of two talks about Mary. (Were these recorded in the Church or Chapter Room, not in a classroom?) Merton does an excellent job of showing Mary as model, and simultaneously examining metaphors which relate to her as light and temple. Also connections should be observed between Merton's comments here about Mary who is "about to introduce us into our former paradise" and in the two sets of lectures which follow (AA 2368 and AA2369) "The Poetry of Paradise" and "Revelation", largely discussions of William Blake's poetry. Very basic literary stuff—these analyses of some of Blake's well known poems are typical of much which is included on these tapes. What Merton did superbly, however, was to provide basic theological insights for his students by way of art and poetry.

Most of the remaining lectures in this grouping touch on Greek tragedy AA2370 ("The Search for Wholeness") and AA2371 ("Community and Transformation") and demonstrate that certain patterns developed as earlier mankind acquired a sense of destiny

called toward fulfillment, are also patterns shared by diverse cultures—Old Testament; Hebrew Prophets; Confucian Chinese wisdom; as well as the Greeks at a crucial moment. Merton pulls it all together, but the truth must be, given his range, these lectures must be fairly superficial. This is not particularly bad: Merton is simply doing what he must do to hold his classes' attention as he assists students to hone in on basic patterns in the monastic life. His main job remains to make students aware of the fact that in community as monks they can come close to God.

In the next three tapes to be discussed here (AA2371 "Community and Transformation"; AA2372 "Religious Principles of Greek Tragedy"; and AA2373 "The Heart Alive with Love") we witness Merton as he demonstrates that the insights the Greeks expressed in classic theater reveal fundamental points about all human nature. Basic ideas about liturgical acts, excess, and wisdom are outlined, yet listeners must be forewarned that this is also pretty basic material. AA2372 is quite fundamental, and in fact so much so that we wonder if this tape might have been omitted from publication. It is valuable, however, as part of the larger scheme. (This tape and the final one to be reviewed are also riddled with "technical difficulties"—buzzes and hums—and again one is slightly puzzled about the need to release this archival material.) AA2373 "The Heart Alive with Love" includes "small talk" at the beginning about a group of contemplative nuns who had recently attended a conference at Gethsemani and some discussion of the upcoming Abbatial elections to be held at the abbey (1967). For Merton aficionados such incidental material may be more interesting than the "formal" lectures. On side 2 Merton makes excellent connections (by way of Hasidic stories, Eckhart, the *Cloud of Unknowing*, etc.) about the living development of love which allows the sparks implanted throughout all life to be released into the flame of conscious awareness.

The final tape of this group (AA2374) "The Religious Intuition" successfully pulls together ideas implicit in many of Merton's lectures both in earlier released tapes and in this series of eighteen as a whole: we come to a fully realized awareness of God's existence in communion, in an existential act, and by being at the center. We fail to do so by allowing ourselves "to think we are thinking" while, in fact, we block God's presence. Much of this (and similar material in all of these lectures) reminds us that individuals are either open or closed.

We should be extremely glad that these unedited tapes are now available. We should also be exceedingly cautious in thinking that

any one in isolation will be of much use! They are often spotty. However, listened to for what they are they do provide much information of use for Merton's students right down into the present moment.

Jim Forest
**LIVING WITH WISDOM:
A LIFE OF THOMAS MERTON**
Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991

Reviewed by Gordon Zahn

Another biography of Thomas Merton! One can almost hear its revered subject grumbling in the background, "Enough already." Consider, if you will, that young man who entered through the Gethsemani gate so many years ago consumed with the conviction and desire to leave the distractions and tumult of "subway" society for the cloister "where everything makes sense." Certainly he could not anticipate the flood of books, articles, dissertations, and the like devoted to him and his works since his untimely death in Asia. Nor, one suspects, would he have wanted it.

Even so, there is a place for Jim Forest's addition to that flood. His book "works" as a model of brevity and condensation comprehensive enough in coverage to provide a suitable introduction to this truly exceptional man and holy monk. Combining material from Merton's best-seller autobiography, diaries, and a broad sampling of his published writings with judicious references to other more extensive source materials, Forest presents a basic literary biography highlighted with additional insights drawn from his own personal correspondence and friendship with Merton. The reader is given a taste of everything: Merton's poetry; his spiritual meditations and more profound theological and philosophical works; and (of special interest to this reviewer) his essays addressing the gravest social evils of our time, racism and war.

Lurking between the lines we even get occasional glimpses of the "problem" monk about whom no detailed biography is likely ever to be written. And Merton certainly must have been a problem in the traditional Trappist setting in a number of ways. Few abbots or other superiors would choose to contend with a monk whose personal