

APEL, William, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton*. Foreword by Paul M. Pearson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), pp. xxi + 202. ISBN 13: 978-1-57075-681-8 (paperback). \$19.00.

In an icon over my desk, Thomas Merton, portrayed wearing the Cistercian cowl, sits in a Zen position. With great serenity, Merton unites two spiritual trajectories. With his raised right hand he seems to recall Jesus saying in a number of contexts, "do not be afraid" or "peace be with you."¹ With his left hand pointed down, Merton seems to recall the Buddha saying, "Be mindful." On the back of the icon, an inscription observes that Merton pointed a way forward in this time of profound cultural change, and danger.

As William Apel states in his preface, Thomas Merton corresponded with people around the world, especially during the last years of his life, a period when four books on Asian religions appeared: *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) plus the *Asian Journal* (1973). Merton's approach to dialogue was experiential rather than dogmatic, as suggested in a passage in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians.... We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.²

Merton saw his study of the world's religions and his engagement with a great variety of people as a contribution in the direction of world peace and unity. He received correspondents at the Abbey of Gethsemani; he visited some elsewhere, whether in New York City—Daisetz T. Suzuki (1964)—or in Asia (1968). Most, however, he never met. As a spiritual discipline he encouraged his interfaith friends to embrace others, that they too might unite in themselves and experience in their own lives all that is best and most true in the numerous spiritual traditions, "a kind of arduous and unthanked pioneering."³

After an introductory chapter on Merton's life of letters, Apel organizes his book around a cluster correspondents chosen for the depth and variety of their religious experiences: Abdul Aziz (Muslim), Amiya Chakravarty (Hindu), John Wu (Chinese),

Abraham Heschel (Jew), D. T. Suzuki (Buddhist), Glenn Hinson (Protestant Christian), Thich Nhat Hahn (Buddhist), June Yungblut (Religious Society of Friends) and Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy (Roman Catholic with Jewish origins). Each chapter introduces the friend, a theme specific to each individual and the text of a significant letter by Merton to that individual. Notes and bibliography guide readers to such literature as Rob Baker and Gray Henry, eds., *Merton and Sufism* (1999), Beatrice Bruteau, ed., *Merton and Judaism* (2003) or Robert H. King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh* (2003).

For twenty-first-century persons of faith, Apel has lifted up the most urgent contribution, perhaps, of Merton, who wrote,

If I had no choice about the age in which I was to live, I nevertheless have a choice about the attitude I take and about the way and the extent of my participation in its living ongoing events. To choose the world is not then merely a pious admission that the world is acceptable because it comes from the hand of God. It is first of all an acceptance of a task and a vocation in the world, in history and in time. In my time, which is the present. To choose the world is to choose to do the work I am capable of doing, in collaboration with my brother [and sister], to make the world better, more free, more just, more livable, more human. And it has now become transparently obvious that mere automatic "rejection of the world" and "contempt for the world" is in fact not a choice but the evasion of choice. [Those] who pretend [they] can turn [their] back on Auschwitz or Viet Nam [or Iraq, Darfur ...] and act as if they were not there [are] simply bluffing.⁴

Providing an excellent introduction to interfaith pioneers, Apel has written a satisfying book. Each chapter stands on its own and can be read separately, for example, by a study group. My main source of disappointment is the absence of letters by Merton's correspondents, a strength of volumes edited by Mary Tardiff, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether* (1995), Robert Faggen, *Striving towards Being: the Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz* (1997); and Patrick Hart, *Survival or Prophecy?: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Jean Leclercq* (2002).

Notes

1. Mark 5: 36 (healing of Jairus' daughter) or John 20:19 (Jesus to disciples after the resurrection); on Merton and fear as a source of war, "The Root of War is Fear," originally published in *The Catholic Worker*, October 1961. A version appeared as Chapter 16 of *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962).
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 12.
3. William H. Shannon, ed., *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 126; letter to Dona Luisa Coomeraswamy, January 13, 1961.
4. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p 149.

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MERTON, Thomas, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 2. Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell. Preface by Sidney H. Griffith. Monastic Wisdom Series 9 (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2006), pp. lxix + 391. ISBN 0-87907-073-0 (paperback). \$24.95.

Pre-Benedictine Monasticism represents a renewed attempt on the part of Thomas Merton to introduce monastic novices to the riches of ancient monastic spirituality. These notes are the basis for two lecture series that Merton gave to a newly combined novitiate of lay brothers and choir monks from early 1963 until August 15, 1965, five days before leaving for the hermitage. Compared to the previously published *Cassian and the Fathers*, which contains Merton's notes for lectures delivered on the same topic from 1955 to 1962,¹ these lecture series are chronologically more focused and culturally more diverse. Merton limits himself to the fourth through sixth centuries, and his coverage of Syriac monasticism constitutes half of the course. The Preface by Sidney H. Griffith, one of today's premier scholars of Syriac Christianity and of Ephrem in particular, helps the reader understand just how pioneering Merton's interest in the Syriac tradition was for the mid-1960s.

As with *Cassian and the Fathers*, Patrick F. O'Connell has expertly edited and annotated Merton's lecture notes. O'Connell's helpful Introduction of fifty-nine pages discusses the historical context of the lecture series. They were originally conceived as a account of the Latin sources that directly influenced the *Rule of St.*