

*Merton & the Tao: Dialogues with John Wu and the Ancient Sages* edited by Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae 2013), pp. xv + 419. ISBN 978-188775299-2 (paper) \$29.95.

The title of this book might indicate the immediate goal of the work to be a point of comparison between Christianity and Taoism; however, the deeper significance of the work is its record of the friendship between John Wu (1899-1966) and Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Neither is a formal practicing Taoist. Wu was a devout Catholic convert with a deep knowledge of Chinese religions and philosophy, and the discussions between the two thinkers also equally pertain to Zen, given that Wu was working on a Zen project throughout their correspondence (1961-1968). Still in Wu's mind, the legitimate Zen masters embodied the authentic spirit of Taoism more than the neo-Taoists (267).

The title of the book more accurately refers to the occasion of their correspondence, namely Merton's project to provide select translations of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* into English. The latter is a hermeneutic achievement in its own right, given that it received significant praise for its accuracy and given the fact that Merton did not know the language. Instead, he relied on several translations in English, French and German. Such an achievement raises an interesting question of methodology in the field of comparative theology.

The reader will appreciate the five essays that precede the correspondence. Livia Kohn gives an excellent overview of the Daoist traditions the likes of which only a seasoned veteran could deliver and one that could further be used as a resource in the classroom. Editor Serrán-Pagán facilitates this understanding further by zeroing in on the mystical teaching of Wu-Wei, a spiritual principle the author glosses as "acting without interfering with the natural course of things" (300). The principle appears occasionally in the Merton-Wu correspondence explicitly but is operative implicitly throughout in their harmonious interchange and dual vocations.

Lucien Miller provides the context for the dialogical exchange in two essays, the first addressing the context of Merton's writing of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* and a second that introduces the correspondence and suggests the providential relation between the two with the title "The Lord as Postman."

In order to temper the "cult of personality" that sometimes follows Merton, the editor includes a helpful essay by Bede Bidlack, a young comparative theologian with expertise in Taoism. He reminds the reader how Merton's successful grasp of Chuang Tzu came from his own experiential "grasp of the Tao" rather than his scholarly expertise on the subject

(84) of which there may be better resources. Bidlack also reminds us that Merton and Wu were pioneers in advancing the Catholic culture beyond the pre-Conciliar suspicion against other religions as well as preceding the post-modern critique of their efforts.

Donald P. St. John places the Merton-Wu interest in Taoism within a larger “ecumenical” framework, arguing that they were not only pioneers in an increasing pluralistic context, but their achievements are pioneering of and conducive to the shift to an ecological consciousness.

Finally, Wu’s youngest son, John Wu Jr., provides two essays, one that precedes the correspondence, and a touching creative eulogistic-like epilogue about his father. I was not that familiar with Wu, Sr. before I read this book but after reading it I greatly admire him. He offered Merton a rare kind of friendship and loyalty that is enviable. “In certain respects,” says Miller, “they are soul mates” (155).

In some sense the decade of correspondence between them reveals some parallels. Both thinkers are greatly interested in building bridges between East and West and working on communicating Eastern philosophy and religion to the Western world. They both are working on lengthy projects, Merton a project on Chuang Tzu, and Wu, a project on Zen. The correspondence between the two further affords an occasion for personal sharing. Wu’s initiative in sharing the grief over the loss of his wife, his life-long soul-mate, and his subsequent falling in love again years after the fact, in a sense prepares Merton to share his own struggles while in the throes of his own “forbidden” love. The letter he wrote to Wu on the latter account remains a mystery. Having received it, Wu probably destroyed it, and by so doing, revealed the stalwart tact and loyalty of his character.

There are many gems throughout their correspondence too numerous to relate here, including their half-hearted allusions to past lives (200, 206). In short, this is a wonderful volume that I really enjoyed reading and its value will be ongoing for Merton enthusiasts, scholars and theologians on various levels of inquiry.

John Dadosky

GRIFFITH, Sidney H., *Mystics, Muslims, and Merton*, 6 conferences on 2 DVDs / 2CDs (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013) \$39.95 (DVDs); \$25.95 (CDs).

The Merton community is very fortunate to have such a distinguished scholar of Semitic languages, literature and religious traditions as Sidney H. Griffith as a resource for the important topic of Merton’s interest in and dialogue with Islam. A professor of early Syriac and Arabic Christian