

ODORISIO, David M., ed., *Merton & Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae 2021), pp. xlvii, 400, ISBN 978-1-941610-85-5 (paper) \$29.95.

This ninth volume culminates the Fons Vitae Thomas Merton series that started in 1999 with the first volume on *Merton & Sufism*. In this last volume, editor David M. Odorisio explores the major connection that exists between the Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and Hinduism. Odorisio, former Robert Daggy scholar and former Board Member of the International Thomas Merton Society, is well qualified to embark on this scholarly enterprise. Not only does he know Merton well, but he also received a doctoral degree from the California Institute of Integral Studies, an institution well known for the integration of East and West in psychology, philosophy, cosmology and comparative mysticism. Studies of Sri Aurobindo and other Hindu spiritual masters are an integral part of this academic institution, located in San Francisco. Also, Odorisio serves as Director of the Retreat at Pacifica Graduate Institute in Santa Barbara and is an active member in the department of Mysticism at the American Academy of Religion.

General readers and scholars of Thomas Merton will find this book extremely challenging and stimulating, both at the spiritual and intellectual levels. For beginners this book maybe too much information to digest, but to scholars of Merton and of Hinduism it offers fresh air considering the fact that many people do not realize to what extent Merton knew Hinduism. Many of us knew about Merton's preliminary interests in Gandhi while he lived in England and his providential meetings with Mahanambhrata Brahmachari at Columbia University, but very few readers are well aware of the many influences that Hinduism had on Merton, including his talks on yoga to the novices and his well-versed knowledge and understanding of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Hence this book edited by Odorisio is a major scholarly contribution to the fields of Merton studies and comparative mysticism.

As editor of the fifth volume, *Merton and the Tao: Dialogues with John C. H. Wu and the Ancient Sages*,¹ I know from experience how challenging it might have been for Odorisio to select from such a vast body of writings and to determine what needs to be included in a book like this for the Fons Vitae Merton Series. And here lies my major criticism after having read the whole volume. With respect for the editor's ambitious intentions to cover many aspects of the Hindu influences on

1. Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán, ed., *Merton & the Tao: Dialogues with John Wu and the Ancient Sages* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2013).

Merton, in my humble opinion he attempted to cover too much material, and perhaps some of the essays may not be of significance to general Mertonian readers or scholars. For this reason, this review will not try to comment on all the essays in this volume but will focus on selected pieces that I consider the most valuable items in the work.

The book is divided into four parts. In the Introduction (xv-xlvii) Odorisio traces the threads of Merton and Hinduism via the different paths (*margas*) of yoga and makes a clear case for the development of the spiritual and intellectual understanding that Merton had at different stages in his life. As the editor states, “This introductory essay has traced the evolution of Merton’s relationship with yoga throughout his life. . . . I hope to have demonstrated that yogic traditions . . . were very clearly ‘necessary’ for his ‘enlightenment’” (xlv). Odorisio’s greatest contribution overall is the quality of his research; his thorough footnotes can be of interest to experts in these fields and useful in their future investigations. As a scholar, Odorisio has greatly helped the reader contextualize this vast amount of information on Merton and Hinduism.

Part I, “Hinduism and Christianity in Context” (1-80), is somewhat helpful to both general readers and scholars alike because it offers “historical and comparative perspectives that introduce the diversity of Indian traditions subsumed under the modern categories of ‘Hinduism’ and ‘yoga’” (xlv). The problem with Part I, however, is that there are too many essays that do not address directly the connection between Merton and Hinduism. As such, the section did not sustain my interest as a Merton scholar already knowledgeable of the Hindu–Christian dialogue but not so much of the direct influences that Hinduism had on Merton. The editor presents a good number of published materials written by different scholars but fails to address the pertinent connections between Merton and Hinduism. While the introduction by Odorisio to Jules Monchanin is of special interest to those readers who want to know more about the special connection between “Yoga and Hesychasm” (46-57), most of these Part I essays do not directly address the Merton–Hindu connection and, in my opinion, can be skipped. This does not mean the essays are lacking in any real value because they offer new information and insights from different perspectives, but ultimately I found them a distraction from the main subject of this volume.

Part II, “Merton and Hinduism: Dialogue and Deep Learning in the Cave of the Heart” (81-263), is one of the most interesting parts of this book not only because there are great scholars invited by the editor to reflect on Merton and Hinduism but more importantly it tracks the Merton connection to Mahanambrata Brahmachari, to the *Gita*, to

Gandhi, to Raimon Panikkar (author of *the Unknown Christ of Hinduism*), to Ananda Coomaraswamy, to Amiya Chakravarty and, finally, to Yogananda. Through some of the readings in these essays we learn more about the Merton connection to Bede Griffiths, Ramakrishna, Patanjali, Vivekananda, Prabhupada and Ramana Maharshi, among others mentioned in these essays. For me, the essay written by Richard V. Croghan (102-14) is excellent in tracing the journey of Brahmachari to the United States. Paul R. Dekar's essay on Merton and Gandhi (142-57) is another piece of scholarly writing that many readers will find enlightening and very helpful. We know how much Merton owed to Gandhi in his constant search for spiritual Truth (*satyagraha*) and his method of nonviolence (*ahimsa*). Merton himself put it so well, referring to Gandhi "as a sign of the genuine union of spiritual fervor and social action" (143). Those readers interested in this ideal of contemplatives in action will resonate with the prophetic utterances found in this essay. (As many scholars and members of the ITMS will know, Dekar has been a longtime member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. Merton, the Berrigan brothers, M. L. King, Thich Nhat Hanh and even Bede Griffiths were all members of this interfaith peace movement in the 1960s.) As always, Mertonian scholars Roger Lipsey, on Merton and Coomaraswamy (197-212), and William Apel, on Merton and Chakravarty (213-32), did an outstanding job covering these seminal Hindu figures. In particular, I found Apel's essay to be one of the most beautiful pieces in this volume. Not only did he cover Chakravarty, but he delved into Tagore, Gandhi, the *Gita* and others. (Unfortunately, there is one little typo: "Ajuna's better self" should read "Arjuna's . . ." [222]).

Part III, "Merton on Hinduism: The Yoga of the Heart" (265-386) is without doubt the heart of the matter in this volume. Odorisio "collects Merton's primary writings on topics related to Hinduism and yoga, many published here for the first time" (xlv) and lists them chronologically according to the development of Merton's relationship to Hinduism. I personally found very helpful Merton's personal tribute to Brahmachari (267-69), the Hindu master whom Merton met providentially at Columbia University. Merton was convinced that this meeting was not an accident. It was sent to him by God. He said, "There was nothing of mere chance here" (268). Meeting the stranger is a common biblical theme and Merton found his spiritual road to the Catholic tradition through meeting a Hindu spiritual master who told him to read St. Augustine's *Confessions* and other Christian texts. Additionally, the classic text written by Merton as "A Tribute to Gandhi" (285-92) is a masterpiece. In it, Merton introduces the general reader to Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), who is known

in India as the *Mahatma*. Next, Merton's essay on the *Bhagavad Gita* (316-20) is equally impressive, even though it is only a few pages. But his understanding of this classic Hindu sacred text is admirable, especially taking into consideration the influence that the *Gita* had not only on Gandhi but on Merton himself. As Merton writes, "[the *Gita*] is really something more [than a treatise on the Active Life], for it tends to fuse worship, action, and contemplation in a fulfillment of daily duty which transcends all three by virtue of a higher consciousness" (316). Again, the Trappist monk gives credit to Hinduism for awakening in him the spiritual value of inner truth similar to what he found in the Gospels. Merton says, "The *Gita*, like the Gospels, teaches us to live in awareness of an inner truth that exceeds the grasp of our thought and cannot be subject to our own control. . . . In obedience to that truth we are at last free" (320). Finally, the last essays confirm Merton's interest in the practice and study of yoga. His knowledge of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* (321-33) is "Very illuminating" (321) and his conferences to the novices (340-81) demonstrate evidence of his initial attempt to bring theory and practice together, but his physical problems exempted Merton from continuing doing yoga using his physical body. This inability to do *asanas* helped Merton realize that yoga is not just about achieving physical positions, but rather it is a way of life. This is why the holistic integration of *karma yoga*, *jnana yoga* and *bhakti yoga* is really important to Merton, especially in his readings on Gandhi and the *Gita*.

Part IV, "Appendix" (387-400) is somewhat helpful. The most important contribution by the editor is the recommended list of sources. Unfortunately, the volume does not have an index to locate some of the most important names and concepts in this volume. I know from my experience with editing Volume 5 how difficult and time-consuming it is for an author to compile an index without assistance. I understand that Fons Vitae, the publishing company of these series, is too small to provide that assistance. But to both readers and scholars it is paramount to have a good index in any scholarly book.

In conclusion, I highly recommend reading this book for different reasons. First, it offers both general readers and scholars many opportunities to learn more about the historical context of Hinduism. But as I stated earlier, many of the readings in this section could be skipped on the reader's way to the heart of the matter, which is Merton and Hinduism. Second, the editor did a great job tracing the spiritual developments of Merton at different stages in his life. Finally, reading Merton's essays recaptures his interfaith spirit by inviting us to meet the stranger in our homelands and in our trips to other lands. Merton himself died in Asia,

but it is no mystery that after reading this volume we can say with some degree of certainty that the Trappist monk found in India and in Asia what he had been obscurely seeking for decades in his own spiritual quest in the West. This is another way to say that the central message of this book lies in the simple affirmation that we can find our true selves in the otherness of a foreign culture or religion by sharing a spiritual affinity that may be foreign to dogmatic followers in both traditions. As the Second Vatican Council recognized, the wisdom found within these Asian traditions is valid. Why? The Spirit blows in mysterious ways. Sometimes it comes from the West, sometimes it comes from the East. And Merton is well known for having built a great spiritual bridge with every religious tradition that he encountered, no matter how problematic some of their followers found their disputed theological questions. This final *Fons Vitae* volume will become a great addition to any collector of books on interfaith dialogue and comparative mysticism. Keep it on your shelves, even if you are not ready to read it in its entirety. As Merton did, you may discover its personal significance at different points along your life's journey.

Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes

HILLIS, Gregory K., *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), pp. xviii, 297. ISBN: 978-0-8146-8460-3 (paper) \$24.95.

It may come as a surprise to no one that we are living in an increasingly polarized world, particularly in the United States. It's quite common to see people being very selective with whose opinions they consume (whether by reading, listening and/or watching) and cutting out friends and even family members who do not fit their idea of what is "right" behavior or thoughts. As the increase of echo chambers seems likely to continue (regardless of one's beliefs), many people might ask: what use is there in dialogue? Who should or should not be dialogued with? Gregory K. Hillis' new book *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* makes an excellent case for Thomas Merton's Catholicity and how Catholics and other persons of faith can learn from him how to dialogue by embracing the uniqueness of their respective traditions.

Hillis' book begins with an introduction (1-14) that serves two primary functions: to inform readers of his own relationship with the writings of Merton and to make the case for identifying Merton as a Catholic. Hillis' engagement with Merton's work stretches back over twenty years, and by personalizing his relationship with Merton, Hillis identifies the importance