

One can imagine Merton's vivid illustration of the story of Noah's ark serving as fertile ground for an Ignatian "composition of place" contemplation. One might imaginatively enter into the scene described by Merton, perhaps with the prayerful attention of attuning to the suffering of the animal kingdom in the present moment. What might it feel like to enter into an ark of contemplation with hens kept in battery cages, pigs confined to gestation crates, and endangered species such as monarch butterflies and bonobos? We might meditatively rest, with our more-than-human kin, in "Abandonment to the mercy and providence of God." This kind of contemplation might lead us into a deepening kinship with and commitment to the flourishing of the more-than-human world. It might move us to align our energies with the will of God in order to bring about "Greater fertility" rather than ecological devastation, degradation, and death.

As Viviano has it in her Foreword, "There is much in these notes to meditate upon and much that can be used to guide us on our own spiritual journey" (x). Furthermore, Viviano suggests that "Merton's notes stand as a challenge to biblical scholars to remember that the Bible is a living text; it is a sacred text" (x). For Viviano, Merton reminds biblical scholars that they "have a responsibility to make their research accessible to the 'people in the pew' and meaningful for their lives" (x). My hope is that this review has served to suggest some of the many ways in which Merton's teaching notes can indeed be a generative guide for our own work of reflecting on, praying with and embodying biblical wisdom. *Notes on Genesis and Exodus: Novitiate Conferences on Scripture and Liturgy 2* is a rich resource that invites both a contemplative and a scholarly read.

Jim Robinson

O'CONNELL, Patrick F., ed., *Merton & Confucianism: Rites, Righteousness and Integral Humanity* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2021), pp. xxx, 335. ISBN 978-1-941610-84-8 (paper) \$27.95.

This penultimate eighth volume in the Fons Vitae Series on Thomas Merton's engagement with the world's religions is a necessary and important contribution to the whole project. Though Merton's interest in Confucianism was not as pronounced as it was in the other two East Asian traditions, Taoism and Zen/Chan Buddhism, the picture of his interreligious exploration would have been woefully incomplete without the publication of this book. In some ways it may even be fortuitous that Merton's attention to Confucianism has been overshadowed by his engagement with Tao and Zen and only has recently received a spotlight through this work.

Chinese cosmology suggests that in cultivating the harmony of heaven, earth and humanity, timing is a critical factor. The last century was a wintry and disastrous season for the land that yielded and nourished the Confucian tradition, for in that period Confucius became a symbol for all that was wrong and backward in a country that needed a fast track for modernization. It is only in the last three decades that mainland China has seen a significant Confucian revival. As the trajectory of revitalization continues for Confucianism in the Chinese intellectual and political life, it is a good time to contemplate Merton's effort to dialogue with this tradition from his vantage point in the 1950s and 1960s.

Merton's exposure to the Confucian tradition was greatly indebted to two Chinese Catholic scholars: John C. H. Wu, who is featured in the earlier volume *Merton and the Tao*,¹ and Paul K. T. Sih, whose correspondence with him is included in the present volume.² But for his friendship with these two scholars, his foray into Confucianism might have remained the private interest of a dilettante. The solidarity and strong affirmation he received from the two, however, suggests a much larger significance. For like his Chinese Catholic friends, Merton was acutely aware of the social conditions in which he lived and of the responsibility he bore toward the important cause of spiritual renewal in the modern world. They shared a similar conviction that dialogue and exchange between Christianity and the Eastern traditions can stimulate a much-needed revitalization of the spiritual heritages of both East and West. Whereas Wu and Sih felt a particular burden for the spiritual and political destiny of the Chinese people, Merton was more devoted to the renewal of Catholic monastic life and the spiritual conversion of Western societies. For all three, the revival of Confucianism as a living tradition and the interreligious dialogue between East and West were music that made their hearts sing.

It is in that light that we can fully appreciate the potential of the present volume. The book is divided into a collection of three primary sources and a series of five essays as secondary commentary. The primary sources include the complete extant correspondence between Merton and Sih, excerpts from Merton's reading notebooks filled with summaries, quotations and comments on his reading materials on Confucian and related traditions and the transcription of six conferences given to his novices at Gethsemani.

The correspondence with Sih (3-80) covers the period from 1961 to

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

2. The best introductions to these two scholars are their respective autobiographies: John C. H. Wu, *Beyond East and West* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1951); Paul K. T. Sih, *From Confucius to Christ* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952).

1967. Sih was the founding director of the Asian Studies Institute at St. John's University in New York and prior to this, Director of the Institute for Far Eastern Studies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. Emerging from the letters is a picture of mutual affirmation and close collaboration between the two. Sih appreciated Merton for "presenting the Oriental cultures to the West in such a forceful way" (4). He would solicit articles from Merton and send newly translated Chinese classics for his enjoyment and review. Merton would send Sih his own writings and inquire how best to learn some basics of the Chinese language. In a January 1963 letter, Sih revealed, after reading Merton's booklet on Clement of Alexandria,³ the motivating force behind the aspirations of his own apostolate. Just as Clement had pioneered a positive approach to Greek thought in uniting it with Christian revelation into an integral Christian humanism, so in our time we could try "to integrate Christian teaching with the native traditions of Asia" (50). The challenge for our age, Sih noted, is that the horizon of encounter with other traditions has been blown wide open, no longer limited to a corner of the eastern Mediterranean. More than a single Clement, therefore, we need "an entire body of Christian scholars working in various centers throughout the West and the East" (51). Merton no doubt would have agreed with this assessment. Such an idea was radical in 1963 and no less ambitious in 2022. But the true note of catholicity contained in this vision is what prolongs the significance of Merton's and Sih's work, giving it a perennial vitality.

The section of reading notes on Confucian-related materials (81-160) is wonderfully enhanced by the editor's meticulous footnotes, which provide further quotations, clarification, cross-references, elaboration of meaning and background information, so much so that together they almost make up a primer on the basics of Confucianism. This section also enlightens the reader to the range and types of scholarly resources that Merton relied upon in gathering his knowledge of Confucianism. He was well guided by some very authoritative scholars such as James Legge, Wm. Theodore de Bary, Ezra Pound, Fung Yu-lan and Liu Wu-chi. The range of his reading, however, was far from exhaustive and most critically, completely lacking in original texts written in the Chinese language. It is well known that Merton never learned Chinese. What marvels the reviewer is that despite this natural handicap and limited exposure, he was able to achieve profound insights into the Confucian tradition. These are delightfully reflected in the six conferences (161-212) he gave to the novices of Gethsemani, most of which took place in 1965.

3. Thomas Merton, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from The Protrepikos* (New York: New Directions, 1962).

The conferences reveal a side of Merton that is relatively obscure: at work as the dynamic teacher of the novice monks. To write about Zen for the popular culture of the 1960s was one thing, but to teach Confucius, who was then busy being condemned in his own country, to aspiring Catholic monks in a monastery was quite another. One would have to gingerly remove the monks' suspicion of a pagan tradition, show them the surprising value of an archaic foreign sage, help them understand the contemplative mysteries of his teachings, and integrate these teachings wholesomely into the Christian view of things. Merton succeeds in doing all that through his creative imagination and a knack for concretizing spiritual realities. His connatural ability to soak in the insights of a foreign tradition despite linguistic barriers shines forth in his accurate and lively presentation of Confucianism. Some of his original approaches to analogizing Confucian and Christian concepts are quite profound. For instance, his association of *chung*⁴ (the Golden Mean or the Middle Way) with T. S. Eliot's "still point" in *Four Quartets* (see 181-82), and his elaboration of both as the pivot of *Tao* or existential position where one is healed of the Cartesian split and regains a wholeness of spirit (see 188, 194-95), form an ingenious feat of imagination and expression. Likewise, his suggestion, which is enhanced by the vivacious way of his speech, that the technique of leaving a blank/empty space in Chinese painting is evocative of the spiritual imperative of humility and silence (see 196-200), is pleasantly persuasive. Scholars and teachers interested in the pedagogy of comparative theology and in constructive theology across interreligious boundaries will find this section charming and stimulating.

The five essays as secondary commentary are the most academically invigorating part of the book. The second essay, by Paul Pearson (237-50), reveals the profound influence of Mencius' "Ox Mountain Parable" in shaping Merton's thought in the period that yielded his epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut⁵ and the book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Merton's famous phrase "the night spirit and the dawn air" (CGB 115-94) was inspired by Mencius. The fifth essay by Robert E. Daggy (291-304) was originally a conference paper given at an International Symposium in Mohism in 1994. It highlights Merton's engagement with Mohism, which is even more obscure than his affair with Confucianism.

4. The *pinyin* format for this term is *zhong*, literally meaning "the middle"; like Merton and commentators of his time generally, the present volume uses the earlier Wade-Giles system.

5. See Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.

The first, third and fourth essays perhaps ought to be grouped together, for they collectively draw out an interesting debate on whether Merton is justified in his critique of historical Confucianism. First, we find John Wu, Jr. (215-36) echoing Merton's distinction between the bureaucratization and politicization of Confucianism in Chinese history and the "truly flourishing and open-ended *personalist* philosophy of life" (223) in its core. The former is like a "fig leaf" that is easily mistaken for "the paradise condition" of the latter (see 232, 235). De Bary (251-66) offers an implicit rebuttal of such a distinction, chiding Merton for his lack of knowledge in the historical contributions institutional Confucianism has made in the growth and development of the tradition, and for his exclusion of Confucianism from his favorite list of "higher religions" (see 253). Volume editor Patrick O'Connell then gives a critical response to de Bary (267-90). He points out the nuance and context of Merton's discussion on Confucianism, insisting that though he preferred Chuang Tzu the Taoist to Confucius, his admiration for the latter's wisdom was nonetheless profound and adequately informed.

That debate is too fascinating for the reviewer not to venture a word. By contrasting the corrupt and rigid institutional Confucianism with its inner core of "personalist" wisdom, Merton was not so much, I suspect, misled by a lack of historical consciousness as he was influenced by his Chinese friend John C. H. Wu. Indeed, a similar kind of contrast is often featured in Wu's own writings⁶ and, as seen in this book, reaffirmed by his son. Without negating de Bary's point of the positive contributions made by institutional Confucians, one can easily understand why an erudite Chinese intellectual like Wu might seriously question the overall health of traditional Confucianism. The fact was that by the nineteenth century, the accumulated form of Confucianism with all its historical encrustations had miserably failed to meet the challenges facing the country. It was besieged on all fronts. Merton's argument may not be as sophisticated as Wu's, but the distinction he makes is one with which modern Chinese intellectuals can fully sympathize.

That said, it is not unproblematic that Merton characterizes Confucian thought as an ancient form of "personalism."⁷ By using this term he betrays his own hermeneutical stance as someone attracted to the contemporary French school of personalism and concerned with overcoming the western ailment of individualism. He sees in Confucius a beneficent resource for nudging westerners out of the mire of individualism without belittling

6. See, for instance, John C. H. Wu, "The Real Confucius," *T'ien Hsia Monthly* 1.1 (August 1935) 11-20.

7. See Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 51; subsequent references will be cited as "MZM" parenthetically in the text.

their precious quest for personal authenticity. His absorption of Confucian insights is in this way colored by his own Western standpoint. It is no mere absorption but a re-interpretation, which does not render his commentary invalid *per se*, as all vital engagement with a tradition by necessity goes about reinterpreting things. It might, however, limit the relevance of his thought. It is likely that a majority of Chinese scholars will find “personalism” a strange name to be attached to Confucius. They will find “humanism,” which is often used by Wu and others, a much more native and congenial description.⁸ Merton’s apparent dismissal of Confucianism as a statecraft, likewise, is conditioned by his context as a Western author and should be taken with a grain of salt. Wu, by contrast, made Confucianism an explicit and inextricable part of his political philosophy even as he sought to update it.

In summary, this book lends an excellent window to re-imagining the Western dialogue with Confucianism through Merton’s admirable effort six decades ago. In it, readers can appreciate Merton’s uncanny ability to acquire a foreign tradition as his own, or using Alasdair MacIntyre’s term, as a second first language,⁹ even if he never learns the literal foreign language. For those interested in creative ways of dialogue and exchange, this book will be a valuable read. Those interested in the renewal of Confucianism can perhaps contemplate the further development of some of Merton’s ideas. Easy recommendations include the connection between Mencius and the “night spirit and dawn air” coined by Merton, the Confucian concept of natural law, the spiritual significance of the indispensable empty space in Chinese painting and the contemplative dimension of the Confucian Golden Mean.

(Two minor errors should be corrected in future editions. One regards the citation of the Confucian classics in the opening epigraphs [v]. The *Analects* and *Doctrine of the Mean* were not actually written by Confucius and can be cited as a primary source with the name of the translator. The other has to do with the citation of the scholar Lin Yutang [134-38, 154]: as is conventional with Chinese names, Lin, rather than Yutang, is his last name.)

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8. See, for instance, John C. H. Wu, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017); Chun-chieh Huang, *Humanism in East Asian Confucian Contexts* (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Publishing, 2010); Merton himself links the terms “personalism” and “humanism” in discussing Confucianism: see *MZM* 51.

9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 337-38.