

# A RICH MERTON ALBUM

Review of

## THE MERTON ANNUAL I

Edited by Robert E. Daggy, Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O.,

Dewey Weiss Kramer, and Victor A. Kramer

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Reviewed by **Arthur W. Biddle**

“Great persons are not soon learned, not even their outlines, but they change like the mountains and the horizon as we ride along.” Henry David Thoreau might have been writing an epigraph for this rich album of drawings and studies, each of which views Thomas Merton from a different angle. The editors mean this series of *Annuals* “to represent the best in contemporary scholarship about Merton’s wide-ranging interests” and they pull off Volume I with *eclat*. Their organizing principle — pairing essays that complement one another — produces a synergy commonly lacking in a work of many hands. The lead essay, Merton’s introduction to the writing of the eighth century Buddhist master Shen Hui, for instance, is illuminated by Bonnie Bowman Thurston’s exploration of Zen influences on Merton and the paradox of a God-filled emptiness.

Thomas Merton wrote “The Zen Insight of Shen Hui” early in 1968 as the introduction to a translation of the Buddhist patriarch’s writings. The edition has not yet been published and Merton’s manuscript lay in the archives at the Merton Studies Center of Bellarmine College until recently when Brother Patrick Hart undertook the editing task. Central to the development of the Ch’an (in Japanese *zen*) school of Buddhism, Shen Hui taught that willing the mind to be empty (as the Northern Chinese school practiced) was self-defeating. The mind is already empty — the secret is not to fill it! And “what ‘fills’ it is the ground of volition or craving . . . , the ignorance that wills itself as a willing self.” This leads to the central question: “How then are we to comprehend a life of contemplative action grounded in non-action and no-mind?” Merton answers that

meditation is not *more than* living, or anti-living, but living without explanation and without attachment to the self contradiction which is life. Life lived without attachment is itself meditation and enlightenment. One does not meditate in order to live, or live in order to meditate, one lives meditating and meditates living, and the two are not separate.

In this essay Merton defines an attitude toward mind, he does not explain how to achieve a state of mindlessness — presumably Shen Hui’s writings do that.

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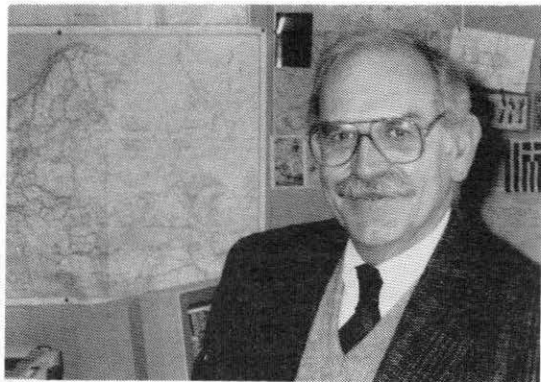
□ **Arthur W. Biddle** teaches courses in American literature and writing at the University of Vermont. He is still recovering from a summer that began with research at the Merton Studies Center, continued with a retreat at Gethsemani, and concluded with several talks with Robert Lax on Patmos, Greece.

Could Merton reconcile the Buddhist desire for emptiness with the Christian goal of being-in-God? That's the question Bonnie Bowman Thurston raises in "Zen Influence on Thomas Merton's View of the Self." Only if God and Jesus Christ could be "understood by the Christian to be empty in terms that a Buddhist could accept," she acknowledges, could we claim that Merton was able to merge both views. Thurston cites passages in Genesis, Exodus, and the sermons of St. Augustine that describe God's incomprehensibility and thus, with a little help from Dionysius the Aeropagite, she seeks to demonstrate God's emptiness. "Emptiness is pure possibility, open to all, denying nothing." To the question, "Does Thomas Merton explicitly make the connection?" her answer is a qualified "yes."

The second section of *The Annual* offers personal reminiscences of Merton the man and the monk. In "Harpo's Progress: Notes Toward an Understanding of Merton's Ways," Robert Lax, an intimate friend since their undergraduate days at Columbia University, captures the richness of Merton's "dolphin-like personality." In terse, joyful language that subverts the boundary between poetry and prose, Lax celebrates the essential harmony of Merton's life, the bongo playing and dancing with the writing and teaching: "his work and play / were prayer / his prayer was / work and play." Companion to Lax's poem is a wide-ranging 1982 interview with Matthew Kelty, O.C.S.O. ("Looking Back to Merton"). Kelty disputes the notion that Merton became unhappy in the Cistercian Order and deeply frustrated with the treatment he received from his abbot. "He told me himself that Dom James [Fox] was the kind of Abbot that he needed . . . His gifts were so strong and so wild that he needed this control if they were going to amount to anything."

In "Thomas Merton and the Living Tradition of Faith" William H. Shannon contends that Merton's life traced three approaches to the confrontation of traditional wisdom and contemporary demands. As a young man "he was locked into a present that offered little light and a lot of uncertainties." Then during his first decade in the Church, his theological outlook became marked by "the narrowness and rigidity that defined the thinking of the vast majority of his fellow Catholics" at the time. But Shannon is primarily concerned with Merton's shift from reliance on the old scholastic philosophy to a new methodology based in experience and expressed not as answers but as questions in an implicit dialogue with his reader, a dialogue that crossed boundaries of creed, faith and even culture until it became truly catholic.

Merton's discovery of the East in the 1960s is strongly represented in this volume of *The Annual*, from Merton's delightful calligraphic drawings that grace the cover and demarcate sections, through the spirit of Lax's poem, to the essays by Thurston and Merton himself. Like Thurston, James Conner, O.C.S.O., links Merton's mature thinking about self and God with Zen teaching ("The Experience of God and the Experience of No-



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Photo by Sidney Poger

thingness in Thomas Merton"). Placing him squarely in the apophatic tradition of Christian mysticism, Conner contends that the central message of Merton's work, forged in "that dark night through which one passes on the way to oneness with God," is expressed best in *The Inner Experience*: "Leave nothingness as it is. In it, He is present."

Merton's teachings on peace are represented here by two printed talks. Merton would have us seek "God and God's will because His will is our peace," explains David Steindl-Rast, O.S.B. ("The Peacemaker: Merton's Critique and Model"). "So, the realization that God is the only peacemaker makes us aware that all other 'would-be' peacemaking that does not flow from God as its source either comes from alienation or leads to alienation — or both." In "Merton, Nonviolence, and the Bishops' Pastoral" Paul E. Dinter uses Merton's writings as well as Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* and the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* as touchstones to examine the nuclear arms race and assess the American bishops' pastoral letter, "The Challenge of Peace" (1983).

The volume takes a new direction in three sections that approach exemplary Merton texts from various critical angles. In a thorough, essentially New Critical reading of "Elias — Variations on a Theme," Patrick F. O'Connell concludes that in addition to the insights it gives into Merton's sense of vocation, "Elias" is "a satisfying and successful work of art." Michael Rukstelis turns to Merton's Columbia thesis, "Nature and Art in William Blake," as the starting point of his study of Merton's development of a symbolic language of vision, what Rukstelis calls "the claritas strategy," in which "the glory of forms" created by the Blakean Imagination illuminates the material world.

In the first of two studies of *Cables to the Ace*, David D. Cooper characterizes that work as a "radical experiment with the language of alienation and its implications for a new poetry — an anti-poetry — of pure signs." Gail Ramshaw examines *Cables to the Ace* as an American epic poem in the tradition of Walt Whitman, Hart Crane, and William Carlos Williams.

Ruth Fox, O.S.B., assesses the development of Merton's spiritual theology between 1949 and 1961 in her comparative study of *Seeds of Contemplation* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Perhaps the most striking essay in *The Annual* is John Albert's intensely personal "Lights across the Ridge." Albert combines an account of his residence in Merton's hermitage with a "study of the connections between Merton and Thoreau through an exploration of Merton's hermitage not only as [physical shelter] . . . but as 'metaphysical space' and 'sacred place' — that is, as region of the mind, heart and spirit wherein Merton, Thoreau and I finally met."

"The Merton Phenomenon in 1987" is a lively bibliographic survey of recent Merton material. Robert E. Daggy proves an intelligent guide through several dozen articles, reviews, re-issues, tapes, translations, journals, interviews, society proceedings, doctoral dissertations, and two books about Merton that appeared in 1987, which was not even a banner year for Merton studies, Daggy acknowledges.

Volume I of *The Merton Annual* concludes with a half dozen succinct book reviews, all but one of which were prepared especially for this occasion. They round out an incredibly rich collection of Merton materials, work of uniformly high quality and amazing variety. If there's been doubt in anyone's mind, this book proves that Merton studies have truly come of age.