

# THE MATURITY OF MERTON STUDIES

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 **Anthony T. Padovano**

It is, perhaps, a significant sign of the maturity of Merton studies that *The Merton Annual* has now been launched. Until now, *The Merton Seasonal* helped to keep people informed of the range of writing on Merton and the themes it explored. The size of *The Seasonal*, however, does not allow in-depth studies nor does its format permit ease of permanent shelving. *The Annual* is a handsome and representative volume. It was especially important that this inaugural venture set an appropriate standard.

*The Annual* contains twenty-one pieces, fifteen articles and six reviews. The fact that five of the fifteen articles deal with Merton's poetry and that one article is the poetry of Robert Lax is surprising and gratifying. It was often in the poetry, I believe, that Merton expressed himself uniquely and without reservation.

William H. Shannon's work has always been illuminating for Merton scholars. His article on "Thomas Merton and the Living Tradition of Faith" makes a number of cogent observations. He describes quite well the state of theology when Merton entered the monastery. It was a theology which transferred its major issues to a question of authority and obedience, a theology often meant to serve a propaganda machine rather than to express the faith experience of the Christian community. Shannon shows us how Merton moved from this point to

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a theology which dealt with three concerns pre-conciliar theology dismissed: the world, other Christian churches, and other world religions.

The poetry articles to which I alluded before are especially helpful. David D. Cooper's piece on *Cables to the Ace* examines this complex poem in terms of Herbert Marcuse's notion of the one-dimensional, non-transcendental person. He weaves into this analysis Merton's concern with the loss of language as communion between people so that the end result is a familiar liturgy of misunderstanding. Cooper shows, perceptively, the way Merton used *Cables* to protest against this loss and to invite people beyond the "wilderness of externals" in which they were trapped.

Gail Ramshaw's discovery of the pattern in *Cables to the Ace* is impressive. She shows us how the long poem is held together by three widening gyres and by a double fugue structure which moves from prayer to protest, from lyric to prose, from mysticism to machinery.

In *The Annual's* longest article, Patrick F. O'Connell gives us a splendid interpretation of "Elias—Variations on a Theme." O'Connell has discovered lost sections of this poem. His reading of it is rich and unflinchingly competent.

There is so much more in this collection. Merton's own article on Zen shows him at his best, harmonizing the apparently discordant, bringing together East and West, action and contemplation. Bonnie Bowman Thurston and James Conner give us articles on the experience of emptiness and nothingness in the encounter with God. Both Matthew Kelty, in his interview with Victor A. Kramer, and John Eudes Bamberger in a book review, suggest that Dom James Fox was a far more important and, indeed contributive, influence in the creativity of Merton than most suspect. Bamberger observes that there can never be a definitive biography on Merton because of the complexity and range of his thinking. No one book or one interpreter can embrace it all.

*The Merton Annual* is a good indication of how wide and deep Merton's interests were. David Steindl-Rast and Paul E. Dinter explore the thought of Merton as a peacemaker. Steindl-Rast does this in terms of allowing Merton to remain a prophet by not making him a celebrity. Dinter applies the witness and insights of Merton to the Catholic Bishops' Peace Pastoral, concluding that the document could have been far more challenging.

Robert E. Daggy gives us a comprehensive bibliography for 1987 on Merton. The survey witnesses to the extraordinary attention Merton continues to receive. The survey is also a demonstration of the remarkable diligence of Daggy as scholar and archivist.

There are, of course, imperfections in *The Annual*. Some of the articles are over-worked. A few are reminiscent of graduate school research papers. At times, the approach to Merton is uncritical. There are occasions when the effort to compare Merton to some other thinker is labored and unsatisfying.

Nonetheless, *The Annual* is an outstanding success, a joy to read, a scholar's delight. It is, furthermore, a publication which begins a tradition and makes us grateful for the caliber and the character of the people attracted to Merton studies.