

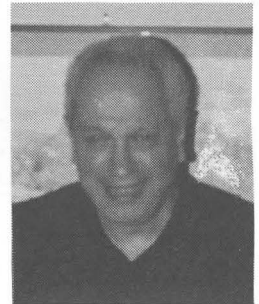
THOMAS MERTON AND THE EAST: A REFLECTION

by **Robert E. Daggy**

In the years since his death in 1968, Thomas Merton has emerged as a champion of renewal — in the Church, in monasticism, in the spiritual life. One way, of course, by which he sought to achieve such renewal, such refreshment in his own tradition, was by study of non-Catholic and non-Christian traditions. He was certainly a catalytic force — he has been called a “bridge” — in the development of dialogue between East and West. He has stood in the vanguard of such dialogue for these twenty years and continues to do so for those who feel that understanding among all traditions is the way, not only to attempt to reach God in our time, but to try to save our threatened world. That many Christians, including Catholics, have drawn back from such dialogue in recent years is surprising to me, but it is not surprising that, in their retreat to exclusivity, they should feel that Thomas Merton was somehow abandoning his Christian and Catholic tradition. I recently had a young Southern Baptist student ask me if Merton’s “going out” after Buddhism did not mean that he denied the central role of Christ in the Christian experience. Yet Merton felt, as he remarked in Calcutta in 1968: “I think we have reached a stage of (long overdue) religious maturity at which it may be possible for someone to remain perfectly faithful to a Christian . . . commitment, and yet to learn in depth from, say, a Buddhist or Hindu discipline and experience.”

Many feel that recent Catholic documents, such as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s “Some Aspects of Christian Meditation” and Call for Action’s “A Call for Reform,” are part of this drawing back. David S. Toolan remarked in the 3 February 1990 issue of *America*, in an article titled “Drinking from Eastern Sources,” that the Ratzinger letter (printed in *Origins* 12/28/1989) “speaks as if the Roman church had nothing to learn from the East.” Those who feel this way lose an essential part of Merton’s message — for the Church and for humans in our time. In order to keep that message current and alive, we dedicate this issue of *The Merton Seasonal* to “Thomas Merton and the East.”

Since the publication of *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* in 1973, scholars have examined various aspects of his Eastern interest. On the lighter side, several people have visited places in Asia which Merton visited. One guided tour, in fact, was called “In the Footsteps of Thomas Merton.” Many depictions of Merton have a strong “Eastern feel” to them, the most striking being Robert Lentz’s icon of Merton as a bodhisattva. Ugo Tesoriere has done a gold foil painting of Merton which has this “Eastern feel.” As he puts it: “It is the pure, real Merton, looking at us from the other side.” It is featured on the cover of this issue. Tesoriere, one of whose drawings of Merton appeared on the cover of the Autumn 1985 *Merton Seasonal*, was born in New York, studied medicine, and ran a clinic in Brooklyn. In the 1950s, he gave up medicine, moved to Rome, and has since



UGO TESORIERE

Photo by Brother Patrick Hart

devoted his energies to art.

The continuing interest in Merton and the East was indicated by a session with that title at the First General Meeting of *The International Thomas Merton Society*. Most studies have concentrated on Buddhism, particularly Zen Buddhism, and on the Asian pilgrimage itself. Despite Merton's lectures to the novices at Gethsemani on Sufism and his correspondence with several Muslims and Islamic scholars (notably Louis Massignon), little attention had been paid to this aspect of Merton's Eastern interests until the session on "Merton and Islam" at the First General Meeting. One of the papers from that session — Burton B. Thurston's "Merton's Reflections on Sufism" — is the lead article in this issue.

Merton's account of his "epiphany," his cathartic experience, on viewing the great statues of the Buddha at Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka, has fascinated Merton readers and his photograph of the "Reclining Buddha" is one of his most frequently reproduced images. Paul M. Pearson recounts his own visit to Polonnaruwa in "Journey to Sri Lanka." Three poems which he wrote on his trip are included with the travel account.

Merton's "presence" is felt in Asia and two brief articles indicate this: Mel Madden's report of the impact of a Merton quote during the Tiananmen Square incident in "Merton's Words in China" and Basil Pennington's account of the relocation of the old bell Merton salvaged at the Abbey of Gethsemani in "Merton's Bell Rings Out in Thailand."

Merton dabbled in Eastern calligraphic art, producing dozens of calligraphy-like drawings, and he experimented with Eastern literary forms, sometimes with masterful effect as in his "interpretations" of Taoist sayings in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. There is not much evidence in his surviving poetry that Japanese *haiku* (a seventeen syllable poem) engrossed him or that he played with the form in English. But he did include a "Haiku Section" in the fourth and final issue of his magazine, *Monks Pond*, and a number of poets (most notably Ron Seitz) have been inspired to haiku by Merton. Jack Ledbetter has contributed "Six Haiku," occasioned by a stay at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Two other poems, by Virginia Boyd and Wilda Dockery, are in this issue — the one by Ms. Dockery concerns a most contemplative cat named Thomas Merton.

Serious study will be aided by Bonnie Bowman Thurston's "Thomas Merton and Eastern Religions: A Bibliography." Author of several essays on Merton and Buddhism, she contributes a select overview of the writing to date about Merton and the East.

Concern over the direction taken by the Houston Chapter of the *ITMS* has prompted a letter from Ana Villasana who wonders why the topic of Merton and the East was seemingly "taboo" at chapter meetings. Finally, Brother Patrick Hart, following W. H. "Ping" Ferry's reminiscence in the Winter 1990 *Seasonal*, reviews Walter H. Capps' edition of *Preview of the Asian Journey*. Two other reviews by Wade Hall and Gary Young of recent books with chapters about Merton by James Laughlin and Charles J. Healey complete this issue.

Thomas Merton attempted to find spiritual nourishment in turning to the East and calls on us to do likewise. It behoves us to expand, not to narrow, our vision. George Weigel calls his commentary on the recent letter "A Call for Reform": "Merton's Rolling in His Grave" (*National Catholic Register* 18 March 1990). Weigel sees this document as drastically narrowing the Church's mission and quotes from a letter Merton wrote in quirky style to his friend, Robert Lax:

I am truly spry and full of fun, but am pursued by vilifications of progressed Catholics. Mark my word man: There is no uglier species on the face of the earth than progressed Catholics, mean, frivolous, ungainly, inarticulate, venomous and bursting at the seams with progress into their secular cities and the Teilhardian subways. The Ottavianis was bad but these are infinitely worse. You wait and see.

Weigel concludes cryptically: "We have." But let us hope that we shall not see everyone draw back from following Merton to drink from Eastern sources!