

# THOMAS MERTON: CONNECTIONS EAST & WEST MORE THAN TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH

by **Robert E. Daggy**

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This Spring 1994 issue of *The Merton Seasonal* has a distinct Eastern flavor, though Western connections are included as well. From the East come our first real contributions from and connections with Taiwan. The indefatigable Cyrus Lee provided the drawing of Merton in Chinese collar by Professor Duan Tienpei of Taipei. Lee has just completed a small book, a collection of ten of his essays on Merton, which he calls *Thomas Merton and Chinese Wisdom*. He asked me to write an introduction for the book which will appear first in Chinese. As I prepared to write this introduction, I was reading John C. H. Wu's *The Joy of Chinese Philosophy* in which he says that joy in the Confucian sense results from doing what we ought to do; in the Taoist sense in remaining in harmony with all things; and in the Zen Buddhist sense in realizing who we truly are. As I read this and pondered on it, it seemed to me that it explained in concise and precise fashion not only Merton's interest in Chinese thought, but his attraction to other "philosophies of joy." I say in the introduction:

Merton's journey, as he described his life in his writings, outlined his search to find joy in doing what he ought to do, in remaining in harmony with all things, and in realizing, so far as he could, who he truly was. In the 1950s and 1960s, he expanded his horizons and began the delightful exercise of studying different philosophies of joy—philosophies which took him in some people's view away from his Roman Catholic tradition. But, to Merton's mind, a mind which leaped to similarities rather than to differences, such study only grounded him more deeply in that tradition.

This is precisely the point which John Wu, Jr., of Taipei, Taiwan, makes in our lead article, "A Song for Tom." Wu, son of John C. H. Wu, who wrote *The Joy of Chinese Philosophy*, maintains that Merton gives us "a more universal and human Christ fully accessible to and whose very essence cries out to be shared by all humans."

Merton came to feel a sense of wholeness, a sense of unity in all God's creation. Since God created everything, God is in everything. He, in fact, titled one chapter of his book of meditations, *Seeds of Contemplation*—"Everything That Is, Is Holy." Time and time again in his writings, he reiterates the fact that God is "shining" through in all His creation: in His humans, in His creatures—birds and deer and rabbits and bears—in His flowers and plants and grass, even in His mountains and rocks. Merton, therefore, felt a sense of oneness with humanity—with all humans on earth. Nothing in the experience of humankind does not speak, somehow, of God. As the earth shrinks for us—and Merton realized thirty years ago how small our world is becoming—it becomes necessary for us to look beyond apparent differences and to learn, for our own survival, to communicate. The opportunity for any culture, any religious tradition, to exist in isolation is gone.

This was one reason why Merton expanded his own reading and study. He included a list of Chinese writers when he reported on his reading at the hermitage in *Day of a Stranger*: "Here is the reassuring companionship of many silent Tzu's and Fu's: King Tzu, Lao Tzu, Meng Tzu, Tu Fu. And Hui Neng. And Chao Chu." And that was one reason why he traveled to Dharamsala in northern India to meet with His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet. Merton felt, only shortly before his death in 1968, that

there was a “real spiritual bond” between him and the Dalai Lama, and the Dalai Lama dubbed Merton a “Catholic *Geshe*, meaning a “scholar” or “learned one.” He made a very strong statement about Merton in his autobiography, *Freedom in Exile*, when he said of their meeting: “This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity. Since then, I have come across others with similar qualities, but it was Merton who introduced me to the real meaning of the word ‘Christian.’”

On April 25, 1994, the Dalai Lama visited the Abbey of Gethsemani, in part because he wished to see Merton’s monastery, but also because he wanted to pay his respects at Merton’s grave. Brother Patrick Hart reports on that visit in “The Dalai Lama Descends on Gethsemani.” His Holiness then proceeded into Louisville where he gave an address at the Kentucky Center for the Arts, jointly sponsored by the Kentucky Friends of Tibet, the Cathedral Heritage Foundation, and the Thomas Merton Center of Bellarmine College. In his remarks, his Holiness emphasized his great admiration for Merton and literally reprised Merton’s thoughts that we must look beyond cultural and religious differences because the chance to live in isolation is gone. Brother Patrick’s remarks are followed by Tim Conley’s poem, “At Merton’s Grave.”

Merton reported in the pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain* that one of the first and most profound of Eastern influences on him was exerted by his friend at Columbia, the Hindu scholar Mahanambata Brahmachari. Merton was not to see Brahmachari again after he left New York, but he did apparently try unsuccessfully to locate him when he was in India in 1968. After years of inquiry, certain more than once that the man might well be dead, William Buchanan finally located Brahmachari, still alive and well and living in an ashram. The impression that Brahmachari was considerably older than Merton and Bob Lax and their Columbia friends was wrong. He was not much older than they. As someone remarked to me when I reported that Brahmachari had been located: “A guru can be any age!” Buchanan reports on his encounter in “The Search for Brahmachari.” His remarks are followed by some appropriate pages from Brahmachari’s diary while he was at Columbia in 1938. Note that he calls Merton “Tom *Martin*.”

The *Seasonal*’s first contribution from an Indian scholar is provided by Guru Charan Behara of Cuttack, Orissa, India. In his essay, “Thomas Merton’s *The Geography of Lograire*: A Poem of Psychotherapy,” he points out that Thomas Merton’s reading and study enabled him to blend Eastern and Western elements in this long, experimental poem. The essay is followed by Nancy D. McDonald’s poem, “Old Uncle Louie,” about Merton’s trip to Asia.

The issue includes reviews of three recent books on Merton. First, psychiatrist John Eudes Bamberger, abbot of Genesee, comments on Robert G. Waldron’s *Thomas Merton in Search of His Soul: A Jungian Perspective*. Then Patrick F. O’Connell reviews Franciscan Albert Haase’s *Swimming in the Sun: Discovering the Lord’s Prayer with Francis of Assisi and Thomas Merton*. Finally, Bill Koch takes a look at Nicki Verploegen Vandergrift’s little book, *Meditations with Thomas Merton*.

We conclude the issue with our usual listing of “Recent Publications by and about Thomas Merton.” Notice the number of fairly recent publications in the Czech Republic and in Poland. We welcome the newest publication devoted to Merton studies. The newly-formed “Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland” has published the first number of *The Merton Journal*. Plans are to publish two issues a year. *The Merton Journal* joins *The Merton Seasonal* (1976), *Contactblad Mertonvrienden* from Belgium (1987), and *The Merton Annual* (1988) as the fourth publication devoted to Merton and his concerns and to Merton events and programs.

Two *errata* appeared in the last issue of *The Merton Seasonal*: 1) Merton Trier reports that his mother’s name was spelled “Gwynedd,” not “Gwynned;” and 2) Sheila Hempstead-Milton reports that spell check apparently changed Elsie Hauck Holohan Jenkins’ nickname to “Homily.” Her nickname was actually “Honily.”