

## Seeking Eastern Connections

Review of

*Christian Contemplation and Zen-Taoism: A Study of Thomas Merton's Writings*

By Ekman P. C. Tam

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Reviewed by **John Wu, Jr.**

Dr. Ekman P. C. Tam's book, divided into eight chapters, was originally a dissertation written for a Ph.D. at St. Paul University in Canada. The author has degrees in theology, psychology, individual counseling, Christian spirituality, and family therapy. At the time of the publication in 2002 of *Christian Contemplation and Zen-Taoism: A Study of Thomas Merton's Writings*, Dr. Tam was the Spiritual Director of the Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre in Hong Kong, and a founding person of a comprehensive training program on spiritual direction for Christian ministers in Hong Kong and Manila.

As the title implies, the book is an ambitious project that attempts to cover all the major Merton writings on Christian contemplation, Zen, and Taoism. Being in the nature of a dissertation, its contents trace the monk's historical development from the time he initially encountered Eastern philosophical and religious ideas in Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*, and the heady contemplative Christian world in the writings of Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross, as found in Gilson's famous study of the Middle Ages, right up to the mature Merton of *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and *The Inner Experience*.

The sections the reviewer found profitable were Chapters 6 and 7, "Merton's Later View of Contemplation" and "Influence of Zen-Taoism on Merton's View of Contemplation," respectively. In the former, Tam points out the significance of the influence of Zen on Merton's views of contemplation as an experience that ultimately deepened Merton's humanity. Tam rightly suggests that Zen helped Merton to find the beauty of everyday life, or in Merton's words, "in normal life." For anyone initiated into Zen, nothing could be more Zen than the beauty of ordinariness. This is significant, for in pointing out the link between Zen and Christian contemplation in Merton, Tam also suggests a link between Merton's idea of the old monastic ideal of the monk separated from the world and the monk wholly committed to the world, of a monk – again in Merton's own words – "capable of a greater interest and deeper concern with humanity." Nothing concerned Merton more in the last decade of his life than the plight of his fellow humans.

What the author purports to be new in his book are the mutual influences that Christian contemplation and Zen-Taoism had on the monk, particularly in the last ten years of his life. The use of "Zen-Taoism" throughout appears to be done for convenience sake but the reviewer finds it prob-

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lematic and quixotically procrustean. One cannot doubt that a good many Asian scholars would have reservations about its usage, though historically, as Tam rightly points out, there have been significant links. But it would seem throwing these schools of thought indiscriminately together can somewhat be likened to speaking of Socrates, Plato, Plotinus and St. Augustine in the same breath without troubling to make obvious and necessary distinctions.

Near the beginning Tam says, “research on the direct relation between Merton’s view of contemplation and his understanding of Zen-Taoism has not yet been undertaken” (6). After a careful reading, however, the reviewer must conclude that the author has not done the sort of justice that such a monumental study would deserve. Much of it is a rehashing of what other, more experienced scholars have done and at more thoughtful, profound levels. Some of the best studies, for example, the works of Catharina Stenqvist, Bonnie Thurston, and especially the books by William Shannon and Lawrence Cunningham – though mentioned – Tam failed to give any serious treatment in his book.

Another significant omission, for example in Chapter 2, “Merton’s Understanding of Taoism,” is reference to the Taoist classic, *Tao Te Ching*, to which Merton devotes an entire chapter in *Mystics and Zen Masters*. One would expect at least a perfunctory treatment of some basic Taoist notions, especially the Eternal or Unnamable Tao. Alas, there is no attempt to explicate the nature of *Tao* as a metaphysical principle, nor examples of paradoxical logic that fills its pages and reflects the heady atmosphere of Christian mystics and contemplatives, including the Desert Fathers, of which Merton wrote so lovingly but which Tam also regretfully did not touch upon.

The book is dotted with many excellent references, which surprisingly are mentioned only in passing. One such writing is the essay, “The Wisdom of Chuang Tzu: A New Appraisal,” by John C. H. Wu, my father. Had he familiarized himself with its contents, he might have discovered a paradigm that could have made his own treatment, at least of Zen-Taoism, more substantially interesting and, at the same time, added spice to his treatment of contemplation.

Another work at his disposal, *Christian Spirituality and Chinese Humanism* (a collection of my father’s essays, listed in the bibliography), contains an essay with the title, “St. Therese and Lao Tzu: A Study in Comparative Mysticism.” In a recorded conference to his novices (whose exact source I cannot cite and would appreciate someone who could), Merton in his own words regarded the writing as “seminal.” The essay throws out a number of suggestive ideas that would link the Lisieux saint and the Taoist sage, particularly in such paradoxes as: to be empty is to be filled, to be poor is to be truly rich, to come down is to rise, to be little is to be great, weakness is strength, to die is to live, to give all is to give nothing, etc.

It would seem only right that in a Ph.D. dissertation on East and West, one could expect a thorough examination of such literature, especially the work of a man who devoted much of his mature life to East-West themes and, equally important, who corresponded with Merton for some seven years at a time when Merton’s ideas were literally exploding.

Each section is well documented with sufficient notes; yet, with the exception of Chapters 6 and 7, the bulk remains unsatisfying reading. One technique the author could have used to his advantage, for example, in Chapter 4 on the foundation of Merton’s view of contemplation, would be to have dropped hints as to how certain Christian contemplative ideas and attributes are related to either Zen or Taoism or both. As far as the reviewer could see, there are no such references and, by his failing to point out such connections in the beginning, the reader is apt to forget the author’s primary

intention.

As to why the book as a whole is unsatisfying, this is due primarily not to rhetorical lapses and stylistic flaws as well as various typos and poor, erroneous footnoting – which are many and might have been prevented had greater care been taken – but to a more serious shortcoming: the author's failure to get deep into the mind and heart of Thomas Merton. His treatment of such a grand theme lacks the thoroughgoingness that it plainly deserves. Tam's effort is not the first nor will it be the last to have fallen short of an author's intended goal in writing on Merton. The monk always appears tantalizingly easy until one begins the attempt to collar him. As Matthew Kelty says famously, grasping Merton is as difficult as bottling fog.

The book covers nearly the same ground as William Shannon's *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*. Though it is unfair to compare the writings of someone relatively new in Mertonian studies with the writings of a person recognized as a great Merton scholar, the similarity of materials and themes covered naturally warrants comparison with Shannon's books whose proverbial depth and clarity have set the benchmark so very high for those doing such work. Although Tam does occasionally refer to Shannon, he might have done himself and the reader a favor with a closer reading of *Dark Path* and *Silent Lamp*, both of which, though written in relatively simple prose, move at a deep and dramatic narrative level. Shannon's style would seem to suggest he implicitly understands the appropriateness and perhaps even necessity to write *contemplatively* when writing on such a person and theme. Was this not what Merton himself understood when he undertook the nearly impossible task of trying to bottle the fog that was Chuang Tzu?

In Tam's case, with perhaps the exception of Chapters 3 and 7 on Zen where the reader at least to an extent becomes privy to the author's more intimate thoughts, much of the writing is blandly academic, that is, dry-as-dust. The manner in which the text is presented may remind readers of the uninspiring prose by which Thomism used to be set forth in the language of the scholastics and, in so doing, did the disservice of inadvertently obscuring St. Thomas' sublime words.

Another disservice the author does to himself and the reader is a literary quirk that borders on the disingenuous. After a Merton quote, the author will immediately present a paraphrase, a regular enough practice. What is irregular is the sudden realization that the style in the paraphrase is quite similar to the words just quoted. To his credit, Tam does provide a footnote. What throws the reader off is the fact that he is at a loss as to whether the paraphrase is entirely Merton's, the author's, or, as it is often the case, a disturbing combination of Merton and Tam. The reviewer literally spent hours attempting to distinguish the original phrases and sentences belonging to Merton from those of the author – as if he were serving as Tam's thesis director. Most of us have committed such an infraction in our own writing careers, but such scholarly infringements become disingenuous when they occur more than a tolerable number of times. Examples can be found on pages 123-27 and 130-31.

One word of caution to writers making use of other writers' material: make certain one understands perfectly well that which is intended by the writer. I am referring, in fact, to what Tam seems to imply by my own words quoted twice, on pages 165 and 209, to wit: "His writings are in fact full of Zen, and such elements can be found in the most unexpected places." William Johnston too comes under fire on page 165 for a similar contention. My rather innocent reference to Zen, Tam seems to infer, means the monk had given up something of his Christian beliefs; quite the contrary, my meaning is that through Merton's contact with Zen, he had become a more universal Christian. It makes me wonder if the author had read my essay and, if so, had he digested the contents.

Merton's incursion into Asian thought made him a more compassionate person and Christian and unfolded in him vistas and depths that surprised many. Would it be too bold to assume that at least ontologically (not theologically), it was this being "full of Zen" that led to those explosions of consciousness – or "sparks of Zen" or God Himself – that for over nearly three decades had relentlessly kept insinuating themselves ever deeper into an expanding mind and kept him from intellectual and spiritual stagnation? For example, it is quite conceivable even the most rudimentary awareness of Zen might have contributed to Merton's very significant and implicit understanding of the limitations of words. As an intellectual, the monk loved abstract ideas and the written word; but, as a man of wisdom, he intuitively realized the dangers of being trapped by both. This is the so-called *Zen* in Merton. And, I could just as easily have said the Taoist or Confucianist in Merton as well.

In concluding, the reviewer feels the book is a wisp of a suggestion as to what is possible in the area of the relationship between Christian contemplation and Eastern philosophies and religions. What is needed are scholars with the gift of interiority that runs deep and broad and who, at the same time, are able to capture the humor and whimsicality that would at least reflect at a minimum the extent of Merton's own genius. This is surely a tall order. On the other hand, perhaps our failure to understand properly both the man and his writings simply accentuates the monk's greatness. As a Zen or Taoist adept might ask reflectively and with some exasperation, "Isn't it finally time to speak of this *geshe* with our gloves off?"

If the contents of this review sound harsh, they are not meant to be; rather, they are simply cautionary words to a budding scholar whose interests, among other things, lie in ecumenism and writings related to it. One might only hope anyone writing in such a vein would require himself to digest all the difficult and profound elements that go into such projects.