

Making Meaningful Connections

Review of
The Search for Wholeness
 By Thomas Merton
 3 conferences on 2 CDs
 Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013
 (www.NowYouKnowMedia.com)
 \$59.95 (list); \$12.95 (sale) (CD)
 \$45.95 (list); \$12.95 (sale) (MP3)

Reviewed by **John J. Callahan, Jr.**

The two CDs in this set contain conferences by Thomas Merton concerning, on the one hand, “Greek Tragedy and Chinese Thought” (two lectures), and, on the other, “Time and Prayer” (one lecture). The producer’s coupling of these presentations, the first two from June 1965 and the third from 1968, and the helpful, collective labeling of them as *The Search for Wholeness*, reflect a keen appreciation for drawing meaningful connections between seemingly disparate subjects, an aptitude that Merton demonstrates throughout his writings and, likewise, in presenting these lectures. With Merton at the podium, someone with only limited familiarity with his work is not surprised, but rather delights to find in these lectures relevant and insightful discussions of lines from T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, passages from Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, and Rabindranath Tagore’s poem “Accept me, my Lord, accept me for this while.”

In Greek Tragedy, Merton finds the following fundamental question posed: “What is a ‘whole man?’” Merton articulates Greek Tragedy’s answer to this question as follows: an “individual person,” as distinct from the group, whose individual life and destiny emerges by making critical decisions leading inexorably to his seeming “ruin.” In this process, the “whole” person gets at the “essence” of life, rather than being lost in the pack. At the heart of such wholeness is personal responsibility for shaping one’s life.

In Chinese Thought, principally that of Confucius, dating from the same general period as Greek Tragedy, Merton discovers a consonant conception of wholeness. According to Merton, Confucius was concerned with the development of the “superior” person, someone who, unlike the majority, is not driven to win and profit by his own actions. The “superior” person “gives himself” and thereby “realizes himself.” Confucius’ four qualities of the fully (whole) human person, namely, compassionate love (jen), righteousness (yi), ritual expression (li) and “all-embracing” wisdom (chi), are, in Merton’s assessment, indicative of a “contemplative awareness of reality, in which ritual (for example, ancestor worship) is an expression of love.”

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True to his fundamental religious orientation, Merton asserted that the “natural patterns” found in Confucian thought and, to some extent, also in Greek Tragedy, call for and find “fulfillment” in Christianity. In this regard, he emphasizes a “cruciform” symbol (chung) associated with the center of the four-part Confucian pattern, with which the four qualities are in dynamic relationship as the “pivot.” Drawing upon his knowledge of dance, and the wisdom of Eliot, Merton notes that “movement” (development) only has “meaning” with reference to a “still point” at the center, the beginning to which one must return. For Merton, Christ is wholeness and his Cross is the pivot. According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:30, Christ “became for us *wisdom* from God, as well as *righteousness, sanctification and redemption*,” aspects which correspond to the four aforementioned Confucian qualities of the “superior” person, as transformed by God’s grace. However, as Merton well knew, and St. Paul had taught, it is by such grace that “God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something” (1 Cor. 1:29). God sought us in our poverty so that Christ might transform us, rather than in any prowess of our own, which is apt to be an illusion.

In his discussion of “Time and Prayer,” Merton first addresses both the primitive idea of time as cyclical, and the classical sense of time as linear. In the former, Merton finds man embedded in nature and its recurring seasons. In the latter, Merton sees man as entirely distinct from time, which is fleeting and, so, not lived. Biblical time entails something of both these conceptions of time and more, namely, the “fullness of time.” According to Merton, the modern person has an “alienated” experience of time as “gaps to be filled.” Given the predominance of “clock time,” the modern person tends to experience time as “infinite indebtedness,” with the “future entirely mortgaged,” i.e. filled with non-negotiable claims, real and imagined, upon our attention and effort through the rapidly passing hours, days, months and years. Merton characterizes modern persons as “sharecroppers” of time, persons whose time is not their own in any sense, and “who owe [their] soul[s] to the company store,” or, as St. Paul might describe them, as “enslaved to the elemental powers of the world” (Gal. 4:3).

So what of God and time, God in time? Merton responds by reminding us of the “fullness of time”: “when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption” (Gal. 4:4-5). Christ paid our debt, and freed us from our alienation from God and God’s time. Sadly, there are those who refuse such freedom from indebtedness in favor of “observing days, months, seasons and years,” for whom St. Paul mourned (Gal. 4:10-11). With prayer, especially constant prayer, time can be experienced differently, according to Merton. Prayer enables us to experience, albeit only to some limited degree, God’s “fullness of time.” Merton identifies Dilsey, the Negro cook in *The Sound and the Fury*, as someone who has had graced access to the fullness of time. Merton quotes her Easter exclamation: “I’ve seen the beginning and the end.”

Merton closes his remarks on time and prayer by reading Tagore’s “Accept me, my Lord, accept me for this while.” Tagore’s poetry resonates with St. Paul’s concepts of the fullness of time and the adoption Christ has secured for us: “Accept me, my lord, accept me for this while. / Let those orphaned days that passed without thee be forgotten. / Only spread this little moment wide across thy lap, / holding it under thy light.” For *now* – as the rooster heard crowing throughout Merton’s lecture on time and prayer seems to say – is a very acceptable time to begin again our search for wholeness.