

Acedia and Wanderlust

Review of

Thomas Merton and the Noonday Demon: The Camaldoli Correspondence

By Donald Grayston

Foreword by Douglas E. Christie

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Reviewed by **Victor A. Kramer**

I: Evaluation

This book is quite amazing. It is good and clear and strangely challenging. It tells us of a Thomas Merton we would just as soon not know about while we also learn to admire him. It is well-organized, not preachy, compassionate. It is well-researched and charitable. It is both difficult to read and a pleasure. It makes you wonder. It enlightens – a scholarly book, well-written and compelling. It tells us several stories: Merton’s quest, the author’s quest, and implicitly, everyone’s quest, in seeking the will of God. It is about indecision and revision and the need to know, but finally it reminds us that we have a need to accept the fact that we must have faith. It is about vocation and seeking, hoping and praying, and it is a mystery-detective story too, well worth reading.

So what is it, exactly? a study of some old letters? Yes, but this correspondence informs us about the many moments when Merton finally stopped trying so hard to be a monk elsewhere and turned toward a world beyond the cloistered one which held him. Clearly in the long series of correspondence, 29 letters from September 11, 1952 through March 24, 1956, about Merton’s efforts to transfer to the eremitic Italian Benedictine Order of Camaldoli (which involves seven persons in addition to Merton himself), we see him revealed as intent upon finding a way to (in his mind) fulfill his vocation away from the distractions of fame and the ordinariness of his monastery. The beauty of the study reveals Merton’s struggles and finally his acceptance of mystery and “God’s will” which respects solitude and love.

The book is therefore valuable for many reasons. Studied in context, the letters reveal both Merton’s psychological complexity regarding his vocation and the careful insights which Grayston has brought to this project. The title’s phrase “the noonday demon” alerts us to Merton’s intense desires and restlessness, which are at the core of the investigation undertaken. We see Merton struggling to find where he might best refine his vocation and we observe Grayston as sympathetic interpreter of the correspondence and what it reveals about Merton during these years and later. We now have a fresh way of reading Merton, so desirous of perfection in his vocation, yet interpreted here at times of “vulnerability to *acedia* [which] may be likened to the way a virus operates in the

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body. It is there all the time, and when the immune system is diminished, it flares up and wreaks its specific havoc” (8).

Often in these letters Merton’s language is, if not stilted, so formal as to make one wonder if these are parodies. (They certainly do not seem as though they could have been written by the same person who wrote the “anti-letters” to Bob Lax.) While ploughing through the correspondence, one finally begins to feel a bit sorry for Merton, so unsure and restless, so pious and a bit (almost) silly. Grayston examines the correspondence in the context of Merton’s desire for more quiet and to serve well as a contemplative. Dom James Fox, his abbot, appointed Merton Master of Scholastics because he thought Merton “had to a large extent” recovered from uncertainly about what best to do with his monastic responsibility. (Readers of this book would do well also to read Roger Lipsey’s recent book about Fox and Merton, *Make Peace before the Sun Goes Down*.) The fact is, the restlessness continued.

II. Analysis

The book demonstrates Merton’s intense pursuit of the mystery of his vocation. It also stands as a statement about the challenges of hearing God’s word. Grayston goes so far as to state that during this extended period of almost four years Merton was in a very real sense “tormenting himself” (2). Attention to the “Introduction” alerts us that these years were crucial for Merton’s development as monk, priest, writer and fully loving person. Grayston also reminds us these letters “mark . . . the end of a three-and-a-half-year gap in Merton’s journal” (9) during this time. The first two chapters provide a detailed definition of “*acedia*,” the “noonday demon” (Ps. 91:6) of the early Egyptian monks. Going back to Evagrius and Cassian, it is possible to see that Merton, while not depressed, was living in a situation where the “sameness of the daily routine; the social limitations of living in a controlled environment with the same group of people; [and perhaps] a perfectionist or absolutist attitude on the part of the sufferer, arising out of the desire to be one with the will of God” (24), caused him to be unsettled.

The opening chapter examines and defines *acedia* and sets the stage to survey critical phases of Merton’s life: 1) novitiate; 2) to ordination; 3) sickness in 1949-50; 4) work as teacher and spiritual director; 5) the period from 1955 to 1965 as Master of Novices; 6) and the final years. Grayston’s analysis of the letters is a balancing act of piecing together the narrative. His second job is careful exegesis and explanation of many different points of view in this cast of characters. Chapters 3 and 4 even show Merton looking a bit ignorant. “[I]t is important to understand how the Camaldolese themselves regard their ancient form of monastic life, something that Merton, it has to be said, did not always seem to comprehend” (170-71).

III: Speculations

The structure of this investigation makes excellent sense: initial definitions, transcriptions of the edited letters; and then in chapter 3 a discussion of what the letters reveal, followed by chapter 4, “*Acedia* and the will of God,” where we see what all this implies, beyond just this complicated series of letters. Grayston makes it clear that Merton’s uncertainty, restlessness, earnestness and good will can now be seen in a clearer light, while he also at times points out the occasional falseness of Merton’s reasoning.

During this period Merton is slowly shifting from an awareness of Europe toward the Americas. To demonstrate Merton's change of perspective, a February 15, 1958 journal entry is used (233). The Camaldoli dream has ended (chapter 5). Chapters 6 & 7 provide a valuable conclusion which explores still more restlessness, his fascination with Latin America and more dreams and then, as well, all his good work in the final decade.

This study will be of value to a host of readers, from Merton specialists to persons pondering a religious vocation. It is almost unbelievable that Merton might spend so much energy and time trying to decide what he should best do. Yet as we know, when he does know, he is a changed person. The concluding chapter, "Solitude and Love," carries the speculations to the very end of Merton's life, and thus make the entire investigation even more valuable.