

Monastic Historian, Monastic Educator

Review of

Thomas Merton on the Great Monks

Afterword by Dr. James Finley, Ph.D.

6 Conferences on 3 CDs or MP3 files

Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2014, 2019

\$19.95 (sale price); \$89.95 (list price)

Thomas Merton on the Cistercians: Sages of Silence

Afterword by Father Anthony Ciorra, Ph.D.

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Reviewed by **Bernadette McNary-Zak**

Together, this series of thirteen half-hour conferences covers Thomas Merton's instruction on Christian monastic history from the period of Benedict of Nursia to the formative documents and abbots of the early Cistercians, delivered to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani on Fridays in the fall of 1962. (They are a reissue and retitling of sets first produced in 2014 as *Medieval Monastic Movements* and *An Introduction to the Cistercian Order*, identical in content except that the original Introductions have been relocated as Afterwords.) Merton opens the first lecture of the first set by inviting the novices to consider what it means to think about Cistercian life and practice as a reform movement endeavoring to live a stricter, primitive observance of the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Over the course of these conferences, he frames a response situated in the development of monastic life and identity as contextualized by European history and religion. As Merton surveys variant, salient forms of monasticism leading to the foundation of Cîteaux, he directly aligns monastic movements with external social, political and economic forces; in these contexts, he demonstrates effectively that monastic practices and teachings produce distinctive spiritualities and communal identities that influence, and are influenced by, the world. It is immediately evident that his primary intent is holistic: "Everything we do has a background," he counsels the novices (*Thomas Merton on the Great Monks*, lecture 2).

Each set includes an Afterword to orient the lectures. Dr. James Finley, a former Cistercian novice under Merton, offers a firsthand reflection on the lectures included in the first set. In his summary overview, Finley explains that Merton's rendering of monasticism in historical context invites listeners to think about how "monasticism helped to shape the history of Europe." In

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the second set, Fr. Anthony Ciorra echoes Merton's instruction that "the monk is always and essentially a man of prayer and penance." It is widely known that Merton valued his role as novice master and teacher. Given that the content of these lectures serves as an academic source for the study of monastic history, and that their oral delivery functions as a pedagogical source for the teaching of monastic history, these recordings afford a distinct opportunity to consider the contours of monastic education. For this reason, I focus here on how these recorded lectures demonstrate Merton as monastic historian and as pedagogue.

As monastic historian, Merton's purpose in these lectures is appreciation not edification. He signals the challenges of historical representation, the need for demythologizing and the question of accuracy; as he explains: "teaching history involves work" (*Thomas Merton on the Great Monks*, lecture one). Attending to the dearth of – and need for – grappling with the sources in their contexts, Merton promises that efforts to "get it right and straight" matter for a number of reasons. The historical narrative informs communal monastic identity, as well as individual monastic formation. Moreover, it also informs the meaning of monastic reforms and renewal in the period from the eleventh through the thirteenth century.

In the first set, Merton approaches the *Rule of St. Benedict* as it was shaped by pre-existing monastic forms and practices; here, Merton also emphasizes that the figure of St. Benedict of Nursia is the product of the later, largely hagiographic work of St. Gregory the Great. He teaches the novices about the transient nature and formation of monasticism during the seventh through ninth centuries in a series of lectures that trace – visually and with the use of a US Air Force map – several parallel trajectories of monastic foundation, expansion and demise. As he outlines these developments he introduces the initiatives of seminal monastic figures including St. Columba, St. Boniface, St. Dunstan and Archbishop Lanfranc. He stresses the point that monastic life and practice have a fluidity – and a stability – tied directly to the contexts of migrations and invasions, of turmoil and violence, of social disruption and dissonance. This is no less the case for the later rise and civilizing presence of the Abbey of Cluny, where Merton's instruction attends to operative power dynamics.

Against this background Merton turns in the second set to the foundation of Cîteaux – as one of a number of parallel eleventh-century monastic reform movements. Merton contextualizes origins from the Abbey of Molesme – and the efforts of St. Stephen Harding in particular – while stressing the value of establishing a firm legal basis for the new religious order that "adopted a different modality of the monastic life" (*The Cistercians: Sages of Silence*, lecture two). He guides the novices through a close reading and exegesis of key lines and passages from foundational documents including the *Exordium Parvum* (one of the early founding documents), the *Carta Caritatis* and the later polemical *Exordium Magnum*. (It should be noted that one of the conferences, on chapter XV of the *Exordium Parvum*, was inadvertently omitted, evidently because it was mistakenly assumed to belong to the series of conferences on monastic vows being presented during the same period.) Merton attends to contexts for composition, purpose and transmission history. Discussion of tradition, legend, myth and fact extends across the remaining lectures; through close, intentional comparative analysis of these foundational documents, Merton shows the novices how their lineage has been constructed in the source materials and in the hagiographies of their founders. Their analysis prompts additional topics for exploration (such

as the location of the monastery jail!) and fuels their return to the source material for further examination. Their study grounds beautifully Merton's final lecture, centered on the spirituality of the early Cistercians. As Merton asks each of the novices to respond to the question of how to apply one of the traditional monastic principles to contemporary religious life, he responds in kind as their list grows. Into this Merton then situates a response to his opening question – now more clearly contextualized so as to be more deeply understood – that considers the Cistercian emphasis on prayer, manual labor and poverty in a community of solitude apart from the world (*The Cistercians: Sages of Silence*, lecture seven).

As pedagogue, Merton depicts the contours of monastic history by appeal to a broad range of sources. In addition to foundational documents of the Order, he draws extensively on a number of stable resources for monastic history such as David Knowles' *The Monastic Order in England* and a number of works by Jean Leclercq. Among other authors, he also introduces the novices to *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, the celebrated 1905 work of Henry Adams, for historical background on the relationship between location, architecture and monastic spirituality in his lectures on Norman Monasticism (*Thomas Merton on the Great Monks*, lecture six). Looking at the tenth-century *Regularis Concordia*, Merton attends more closely to the details of distinctive monastic practices including foot washing, three-fold prayer, daily communion and the use of bells. He creates a lively, intellectual classroom space with explicit standards and clear expectations for the novices to listen, to engage and to retain the material. He asks the novices to make connections, and he encourages and exhorts them as needed; his dialogical approach allows him to reinforce, redirect or expand their responses. He guides their thinking and stretches their understanding of monastic history by conveying that this education matters. He invites the novices to be inquisitive and to understand the ways in which monastic life informs their identity. He teaches them about the core documents of the Order so that they might understand their place in its historical context. Monastic education is neither perfunctory nor accessory; rather, it is entirely relevant and thoroughly purposeful.

Listeners who wish to consider the material contained in these conferences in more detail can consult Merton's own teaching notes as published in *Medieval Cistercian History: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 9 (Liturgical Press, 2019). Former novice William R. Grimes' prefatory remarks hearken to the persistent impact of Merton's work and precede Patrick O'Connell's accessible, insightful introduction (see in particular the discussion comparing the recorded presentations with the written text: xlii-1). This volume also includes a Table of Correspondences between written and oral versions (259-60) that provides a helpful resource for future study and analysis of these important conferences.