

Elective Affinities

Review of

Merton & Confucianism: Rites, Righteousness and Integral Humanity

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

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Reviewed by **Lucien Miller**

Confucius' well-known sigh is often quoted: "Alas! No one knows me." Had he read the latest volume of the Fons Vitae Merton Series, Patrick F. O'Connell's edition of *Merton & Confucianism*, I believe he would have cheered: "At last, someone really knows me!!" That "someone" is of course Thomas Merton. But I also must add, Patrick O'Connell, who knows Merton's Confucius almost as well as he knows his Merton. (In that regard, I salute my dear friend and colleague at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Professor Alvin Cohen, for his exceptional help in my own study of classical Chinese and Confucianism.)

As O'Connell demonstrates, Merton was blessed with a deep affinity for Confucius, an accord readers recognize as an integral dimension of his oneness with major world religious founders and prophets East and West. This affinity is brilliantly revealed in the eight volumes of the Thomas Merton series published by Fons Vitae: *Merton & Buddhism*, *Merton & Confucianism*, *Merton & Hesychasm*, *Merton & Indigenous Wisdom*, *Merton & Judaism*, *Merton & the Protestant Tradition*, *Merton & Sufism* and *Merton & the Tao*; the ninth and final volume, *Merton & Hinduism*, edited by David M. Odorisio, is now in press. That rapport, I believe, was personal, contemplative and mystical, a seed planted within Merton at birth, growing in fits and starts through a variegated youth of wandering and wondering, then blossoming in a stunning array of self-revelatory writing nurtured by an interior life of prayer as monk and hermit. For us who have loved him, he is a graced presence, calling us to prayer and service on behalf of a world on fire.

The incredible thing is that Thomas Merton knew Confucius or "Ju philosophy" (pronounced "rue," not "jew") second-hand, so to speak, through translations, commentaries, letters and dialogues with learned Chinese and Western specialists who read Confucius in classical Chinese. Yet it was his intuitive affinity that mattered, a graced empathy as contemplative poet and monk-hermit, to absorb another mind and spirit and "translate," so that he becomes the other. This is most clearly exemplified in Merton's identification with the Taoist classic, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, about which Chinese classics scholar Dr. John C. H. Wu wrote Merton: "I have come to the conclusion that you

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and Chuang Tzu are one. It is Chuang Tzu himself who writes his thoughts in the English of Thomas Merton” (see *Hidden Ground of Love* 631).

Was Merton a complete master of Confucianism, Confucius’ teachings, followers and legacy? By no means – he could never become such without reading Confucian texts in classical Chinese. But as Cistercian monk and East-West go-between, he penetrated the mind of Confucius and the Confucian tradition to such a depth that he revealed yet another Asian path to Christ, as he did in his immersion in Buddhism and Taoism. In his purview of spiritual traditions and faiths East and West, Merton made concrete the metaphysical truth that we need the other to become our true selves in Christ Jesus.

In his Introduction, O’Connell introduces the basic teachings of Ju philosophy: traditional personalism, basic social relationships and obligations, acting according to nature and tradition, and the virtues of reverence, wisdom and co-humanity or love of all others (*ren*) – in other words, a *way of life*, not a doctrine. As O’Connell writes, Merton’s “discussions of Confucian ideas and texts are an integral part of his overall interaction with Eastern thought” (xiii), and strongly hint that a study of Confucianism might inspire and deepen our understanding of the Gospel.

Merton & Confucianism unfolds in two decidedly different parts: “Sources” (1-212) and “Studies” (213-304), the former a comprehensive gathering of Merton’s extant correspondence with Paul Sih (3-80), reading notes (81-160) and novitiate conferences (161-212) relating to Confucius, and the latter essays by five Merton scholars illuminating Merton’s grasp of Confucius and related materials. Source studies can be tedious, as in the reading notes, but a great service is done by making these citations available together, released from individual preservation to a general audience. Catholic Chinese sinologist Paul K. T. Sih’s letters must have been illuminating to Merton. They deepened his love and knowledge of Chinese wisdom, teaching him that Confucian and Taoist humanists were “heralds who sowed the ‘seeds of the Logos’ in the hearts of men before ‘the Word was made flesh’” (7-8). Likewise Buddhism, said Sih, was “a beautiful and appropriate dwelling” for the humility of Christ (35).

To my mind the studies by John Wu, Jr., Paul M. Pearson, Wm. Theodore de Bary, Patrick F. O’Connell and Robert E. Daggy may be fruitfully read as a dialogue among Merton scholars and friends which revolves around distinctly different perspectives. In “Thomas Merton and Confucian Rites” (215-36), John Wu, Jr. uncovers a “Benedictine setup” (217) in Confucian values and morals, while for Merton Confucianism contains an Asian wisdom the West lacks. Conversely, frantic about wanting to become Western, Asians have renounced Asia, says Wu. In his deeply moving, lyrical essay “Wisdom Cries the Dawn Deacon” (237-50), Paul Pearson illuminates the “night spirit and dawn breath” (242) in a Confucian parable which speaks to Merton’s thirst for silence, rest and breath in his contemplative life. Western sinologist Wm. Theodore de Bary entertains readers in “Thomas Merton, Matteo Ricci, and Confucius” (251-66) with personal reminiscences of Merton among the *Jester* magazine crowd at Columbia and sharing the Beats’ perspective on life. But he contends that Merton overlooks Confucianism as not being a higher religion, when in fact, de Bary asserts, it was the most vital effective spiritual force in Chinese history although it became a suffocating system over the course of centuries. Patrick O’Connell’s “A Way of Life Impregnated with Truth” (267-90) responds to de Bary’s claim that Merton undervalues Confucianism, demonstrating that de Bary overlooks Merton’s substantial focus on Confucian tradition in his essays, letters, journals,

novitiate conferences and reading notebooks as well as footnotes. In addition, Merton underscores the “profound Catholicity of Confucian philosophy” (278-79), sees its message as “one of the most admirable achievements in human history” (280), a “magnificently human . . . vision of human flourishing” and “the key to classic Chinese thought” (287). Lastly, the late Robert E. Daggy maintains in “Mo Tzu and Thomas Merton” (291-304) that had Merton lived longer, instead of denigrating the Confucian-era writer Mo Tzu and his Mohism, Merton would have once again felt a deep mystical sense of affinity for the Chinese philosopher’s core values and teaching of universal love, a love that might save the world.

Interestingly, to me an East-West dialectic is at work in *Merton & Confucianism*. I believe that a number of the Chinese scholars cited in O’Connell’s book were Catholic, and hoped for a renaissance of Confucianism through an interiorizing of Gospel values which echo and amplify Confucius’ teachings. By the same token, many of us Catholic Merton aficionados experience a renaissance of the Gospels not only through the study of Confucius and Confucianism, but by contemplative readings of various other classical Asian literary and philosophical texts as well.

Both perspectives are mirrored in the mind of the late Japanese Buddhist monk and Catholic mystic, Father Shigeto Oshida, OP, founder of the Takamori Hermitage interfaith community in the Japanese Alps. His view was that a stream flows from the Eternal Sphere, pouring into and through the various cultures, civilizations and religions of the world, and each experiences and expresses the divine Source in its own unique way. Christ the Word is visibly and invisibly present in all. (For a vision of Fr. Oshida’s Buddhist-Catholic understanding, readers may care to read my recent *The Hidden Side of the Mountain: Wisdom’s Poor and Holy* [Fons Vitae, 2021]).

How do we experience the truth of the dialectical East-West Buddhist-Christian perspectives? Let me close with an Oshida koan which mirrors the parables of Jesus. When I badgered Father Oshida in a private audience at his Takamori hermitage with a score of queries regarding Christian–Buddhist encounter, he rang his little desk handbell with a flip of his wrist: “Too many questions, too intellectual!” he exclaimed dismissively. Afterwards when I ventured to work in the rice fields during Takamori’s summer rice harvest, I clumsily tried to stack the rice stalks in rows of neat tepee-like bundles, as all my Japanese confreres did, but my tepees immediately collapsed in a heap at my feet as soon as I tried to tie and release them. Observing me, Father Oshida shouted: “Stop! Stop! Stop! Be the rice farmer. The farmer does not consult a book ‘How to Harvest Rice.’ He *listens* to the rice. LISTEN TO THE RICE! The rice will tell you *everything*.” I suggest that is what we might well do after absorbing yet another of Patrick F. O’Connell’s masterful Merton studies: listen to the Asian rice. It just might tell us everything.