

Fresh Encounters with a Real Christian

Review of

Thomas Merton in California: The Redwoods Conferences & Letters

By Thomas Merton

Edited and Introduced by David M. Odorisio

Foreword by Kathy DeVico, OCSO

Preface by Douglas Christie

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Reviewed by **Ellyn Crutcher**

To begin, I must give thanks. Redwoods Monastery's founder, Mother Myriam Dardenne, OCSO, not only fostered Thomas Merton's two sets of 1968 talks there, but their recording and eventually their preservation, before her 2002 death. Current Redwoods Abbess Kathy DeVico, OCSO entrusted the recordings to David Odorisio in 2021, more than 50 years after they were made. Odorisio accepted the significant undertaking to edit the transcribed recordings and to select additional written and visual materials to give readers a rich context in which to ponder the Redwoods conferences.

Having made a personal retreat at Redwoods in 2003, where I read Merton's *Thoughts in Solitude*, reading this book reactivated my experience, reviving vivid memories of the beautiful, wild place and its guardians. Less than ten years after the 1968 conferences, Douglas Christie made a retreat at Redwoods, which infuses his Preface to the book (xiii-xvii). If you lived through the 1960s, this book is particularly worthwhile. If you were born more recently, it captures that tumultuous period and provides current-day and timeless guidance, on a kaleidoscope of topics.

All readers can now make a virtual, yet quite spiritual, Redwoods Monastery retreat without the long, physical journey to Whitethorn. The book's price is thus a relative bargain.

Thomas Merton in California is a practical tool and reference: no need to pull relevant letters from one book, photos from other sources and locate a map of Northern California – it's all at your fingertips. Its index adds further ease to accessing topics or people of interest to a reader or researcher. Although I read it in its entirety, I recognize that it need not be read *in toto*, or all at one time, in order to be comprehended. Each "chapter" is worthy of being pondered by itself, or as an invitation to follow the topics of that chapter into greater depth.

I label what I read as "fresh." Thomas Merton is with all of us – men, women, monks, nuns and lay people, like Gracie Jones or Mike the guitarist. Previously, there have been Merton encounters

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that were recorded and included in various publications, where the talks were with a special group: novices at Gethsemani, Loretto sisters, contemplative sisters or Protestant ministers. I felt more invited to witness the Redwoods conferences and what took place there because of this book. I sense that Thomas Merton felt at ease with the other participants and expressed himself freely. He trusted them and spoke candidly. Merton lectures on the fine points of his sources and related his discernment process about them. He cracks jokes and uses humor, especially embellishments. He tells stories from his experience at Gethsemani. He is real.

As Gracie Jones's newspaper article in the book's Appendix (429-34) relates, with Fr. Tom you felt that he had finally met your first "real priest" – your first "real Christian" (432). I was amazed by the relevance of the Redwoods talks to my current daily reflections while making a month-long Ignatian retreat in January and February. Reading this book and making my retreat just happened to coincide.

Why did Thomas Merton go to Redwoods in May 1968? When Merton first traveled to Redwoods, he had been asked to give the Cistercian sisters their annual retreat. He had maintained a relationship via correspondence with Mother Myriam, from the time of the nuns' Fall 1962 arrival in the US from Belgium. The initial four sisters traveled across the country to reach their new home in Northern California. Their Gethsemani days proved fortuitous: at dinner they encountered Fr. Louis.

Merton, an avid reader/sponge, had been studying for years the materials he shared with the sisters in May 1968. Now, he would bring his thoughts about myriad topics, and extensive knowledge about a wide range of thinkers, to his talks at Redwoods. Merton shared insights about modern consciousness, including ecological consciousness. The doors to explore other faiths had been officially opened. There was a new focus on interreligious dialogue since Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*. Pope Paul VI initiated a new department within the Roman Curia for relations with people of other religions on Pentecost Sunday 1964. For some years Merton had studied other faiths' texts and corresponded with experts, so that he was prepared to discuss with the Redwoods community the subjects of Hinduism, yoga, Sufism, Zen, indigenous rites of passage and interpretation of dreams.

By May 1968, when the retreat was given at Redwoods, Merton's thinking on these subjects had matured and been refined by his writings, talks to novices and contemplative sisters, as well as dialogue sessions with Sufis and Protestants that were held at Gethsemani. Merton warned Mother Myriam in an April 28, 1968 letter, "do not expect formal lectures or still less 'sermons' (God forbid!). . . . I am coming not with answers but with questions" (394-95). Still, at Redwoods he offered insights related to Sigmund Freud, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Norman Vincent Peale, Simone de Beauvoir, George Orwell, Martin Luther, Karl Stern, Mary Daly, Aldo Leopold, Dom Bede Griffiths, OSB, Francis Mahieu, OCSO, Meister Eckhart, D. T. Suzuki, Raimon Pannikar, Marion Woodman, Niels Bohr, Bob Dylan, Simon and Garfunkel, John Coltrane, Beatrice of Nazareth, Louis Massignon, Charles de Foucauld, Pharaoh Sanders, C. G. Jung, Ibn al Arabi, Syed Hussein Nasr, Rumi, Al Hallaj, William Blake, Peter Nabokov, Claude Levi-Straus, André Ravier, Romano Guardini, Aldous Huxley, Jean Leclercq, OSB, Ping Ferry, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Daniel Berrigan, Thich Nhat Hanh, Corita Kent, Erich Fromm, Mahatma Gandhi, Werner Heisenberg, Bernard of Clairvaux, Paul Klee, Chris Meatyrd, Will Campbell, Rabindranath Tagore and Che Guevara. Readers will appreciate the footnotes provided by Odorisio, giving context for Merton's remarks covering such diverse subject matter and people. For example, in Chapter 18 alone, 23 helpful footnotes are provided.

I found it beneficial to make notes as I read the 19 chapters of the transcribed May and October 1968 gatherings.

Favorite insights from the first retreat include:

- “Contemplatives are like trees that clear the air at night” (60).
- Time wasn’t a concept until the Renaissance: “Renaissance man [is] ‘like a bird in the air with no stable support, maintaining his possibility . . . by beating his wings.’ This is . . . the source of this constant threat of depression.” It’s the conviction or illusion “that you have to be constantly beating your wings, or you fall” (109).
- Merton describes his hermit life by saying he doesn’t want to read as much as he had thought, even though his hermitage is full of books. He also says his hermitage is full of dust on his Venetian blinds. What’s best about solitude is “just simply doing nothing. I wish I could do nothing better. I work too much”; and then, “I have a terrible problem with letters. I’m getting more and more, so I don’t answer them” but “you have to answer some” (129).
- Merton describes the play of God as the dance of Shiva. The “whole of the cosmos and nature, and everything in it, is the play of God” (140).
- “The key to karma yoga is the renunciation of the fruits of action” (146).
- “Competition and success are built into American society. The religion of this country is success” (149).
- The Vietnam War is strictly the USA in “technological karma at work” – “like a squirrel on a wheel” (151).
- Bhakti yoga is the yoga of Saint Bernard, because you love God without any reason, simply because he’s God, and there’s an important element of grace. The “whole thing is love, and nothing else. . . . You don’t worry about anything, you simply love” (157).
- Merton cautions those exploring other faiths to watch out for the supermarket “mishmash,” because learning about other traditions has to be put to use to answer how it will be applied for me, not just studied. Otherwise you lose your identity (171-72).
- Merton says William Blake is a Sufi and that his consciousness is as close as you can get to that of Ibn al Arabi, the Andalusian (see 200).
- Merton comments that he hasn’t had enough contact with Indians, and that he would really like to go into that. He understands they had a fantastic vocabulary, beyond ours, and their thinking was extremely sophisticated (see 221-23).
- Our inner “yes” to God corresponds, almost exactly to Eckhart’s idea of “the spark” in the depth of your being that’s always there, and which has to be activated by the love of God (237).
- Symbol is the first step towards inner transformation, but the symbol itself doesn’t do it. Merton thought the world is full of signs, and as an example cites Sister Corita Kent who says Mary is the “juiciest tomato of them all” (248).
- Merton believed “Music develops one’s interior senses,” and dancing “has to do with interior senses in a way. It’s an expression” (252).

Five months later, Merton has returned to Redwoods Monastery en route to Asia. He’s nearly ecstatic as he tells his fellow conferees to take advantage of the trees, the environment and describes

the surroundings: “sea, sky, waves, birds, sea lions. This is where you get your answers. . . . Everything connects” (262). He humbly states in the opening session that he would like to find out what’s going on with them and have them educate him about what they want. Merton contrasts technology, with its progress horizontally, starting in one point and moving to another, and prayer, where you start where you already are. It’s the dimension of ends that have already been achieved and need to be enjoyed. He references how busy everyone’s been, pushing like mad so they can do new things, but now that Vatican II has occurred, the pushing isn’t necessary anymore and now “we realize we don’t really know what we wanted to do” (263).

Returning to the issue of time, Merton says that has to be experienced in a new way. In a house of prayer both time and place are important, but time is the most important. We have to become non-obsessed with time. It’s a question of slowing down; if we reduce our speed to somewhere like 90 miles an hour where it’s feasible instead of 300 miles an hour, “we will begin to have time to listen to what is going on. Things will begin to take shape by themselves” (265).

Merton observes that people take mescaline for the same reason that they want a house of prayer, that it lets you “find out something that’s already inside you” (266). Merton tells the group, “Let’s not be ashamed of the word ‘contemplative’ anymore” (270). He connects pilgrimage and the hermit life, by describing its beginnings with the Irish. A monk would go to the abbot and say, “can I borrow a boat for the summer” and I’ll come back in the fall. Some went to Iceland, Greenland or islands of Scotland, and came back (271). Recluses at holy places were often transplanted Irish monks. Since the third century in Egypt there’s been a history of hermits, up through the Middle Ages and the Franciscan movement.

Merton says that God is really asking of you to be yourself, so you will not be able “to fit into anyone’s ‘mystique’” (275). When asked to describe his hermit life by Sr. Mary Aquin, IHM, Merton clarifies that his life at the hermitage is focused on writing books. “I don’t set myself up as a hermit at all. It’s a life of privacy. A certain amount of privacy is necessary for me. . . . I’d rather not be called a ‘hermit.’ I’m an anti-hermit” (277).

The rest of the life in prayer session included a discussion of the use of atomic bomb to force others to submit unconditionally to your ideas or be destroyed. Merton believed the great contemplative, monastic community of the twentieth century was Niels Bohr’s group working on the atomic bomb in Copenhagen. Merton also reveals the Shaker spirituality evident in the chairs they produced and Mother Ann Lee’s philosophy. Merton even delved into to current university revolutions that are being run by young people who seem like monks.

When the group next gathers, Sr. Mary Aquin, IHM reads them a detailed report from the Monroe, Michigan conference on forming Houses of Prayer that 160 people had attended in July. (This report is not included in the transcription and is not in the book’s appendix.) Mother Myriam recalled that a deeper concern about prayer emerged at the Monroe conference. Fr. Ed Hennessey, CP recalled that there was concern about prayer relating to community houses and beyond. Though invited, Merton was not present at the Monroe conference but offered the Redwoods group his view that prayer had become “sclerotic . . . ossified, rigid.” Merton wanted to break out of special rules before you would be able to have a house of prayer (299). Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB thought it was important to have members of the group in the house bring together the wealth of spiritual traditions in all mankind (see 301). Merton counseled that they should be aware that there is a

mystique that they are the superior people because they have entered religious life and he discounts the mystique that considers they are “the absolute cream of the crop. We’re the best Catholics” (301).

A few highlights from the three-days’ discussion include:

- “The great thing in prayer, then, is not to pray . . . but to go directly to God” (305).
- The Jesus prayer leads one to very rapidly “forget all about prayer” (306).
- Prayer is being at the “fountainhead” – done on a deep level “you don’t know you’re praying. . . . The best way to pray is just simply to stop, and let prayer pray itself in you, whether you know it or not” (308-309).
- A life of prayer is “a life of faith,” but also “a life of doubt. If you never doubt, you can’t pray. You have to doubt.” It’s necessary to struggle with that (309).
- In a house of prayer, one could finally realize that their identity consists not in “making ourselves worthy” to God, but realizing “God simply loves us because He loves us,” and then “our whole life of prayer . . . becomes praise and thanksgiving” (311).
- Merton says prayer is the quest for the central sense of identity in Christ. “We no longer belong to ourselves. We belong entirely to Christ” (319).
- The most striking feature in Zen is gratitude, using a gesture, called *gravitas*, everything received with a little bow (see 324).
- Tibetan Trungpa Rinpoche’s 1966 autobiography had kindled a desire on Merton’s part to meet him when he got to India. When they did meet in Calcutta and Delhi they were like old friends (328).
- Merton described the *Monks Pond* publication as “another kind of Pentecostal thing,” because it was “just letting things happen” without a plan (343).
- Merton contrasted the Renaissance concept of time with the indigenous peoples’ view that there was really no time in our sense at all. Everything “is cyclical.” It’s recurring (350).
- Merton observes that we tend to experience time as infinite indebtedness. That doesn’t help the life of prayer. He lists all the words that begin with the root, “over”: overwork, overstimulation, overcompensation, overproduction and overkill (353-54).
- The important thing in the house of prayer is to experience time in some other way than simply having to catch trains or planes. Don’t “be dominated by the timetable” (359-60).
- In prayer, we truly rest, which is the “natural desire of the human heart.” You are “completely at God’s disposal” (369).
- The whole life of prayer should be seen as a constant response to God. Responding “with a ‘yes,’ with a consent,” staying willing (371).
- Merton describes the events of Selma as “a *kairos* moment” which allowed many Christians to personally recognize it “at that moment” (379).

After thanking everyone for the fruitful three days of conferences, Merton prays:

“Thank you, O Lord, for all these gifts You’ve given us these few days. We realize more and more how much Your action and Your love is the most important thing. Help us to be open to that love, and open to one another, and all whom You send to us. Help us to be men and women of prayer, without worrying about it, or knowing it, or wanting to see it” (380). This prayer encompasses my own gratitude for the treasures *Thomas Merton in California* has made accessible to me, to us all.