

Res 338 Thomas Merton
Fall, 1988
M - 6:00-8:40 p.m.

Dr. Christine M. Bochen
Carroll Hall 212, ext. 482
Office Hours: M,W 1:30-3:00
Also by appointment and drop-in

Course Description:

Thomas Merton's life and thought as a contemplative and social critic, explored through a study of his writings.

Perspective:

"Life consists in learning to live on one's own, spontaneous, freewheeling: to do this one must recognize what is one's own -- be familiar and at home with oneself. This means basically learning who one is, and learning what one has to offer to the contemporary world, and then learning how to make that offering valid."

Thomas Merton, "Learning to Live"

The purpose of the university is self-discovery. The discovery of the self, Merton wrote, involves the discovery of other persons and the discovery of God. In the university and college, the task, Merton suggests, is to learn how to live.

In each age, there are people to whom others turn for lessons on how to live. These are the guides and gurus, the people who seem to have discovered, through experience, life's meaning and who have the gift to be able to point others in the right direction, to steer them home, to help persons to discover their truest selves. Thomas Merton became such a one for many during his lifetime and he continues, through his writings, to guide people toward self-discovery, to help them experience deepened understandings of themselves, others, and God.

Through his life and writing, Merton has become a person whose example and thought facilitate the "learning for life" that Merton believed was the essential work of higher education.

Focus:

We will study the man -- Trappist monk, contemplative, and social critic -- through his writings. Reading Merton's autobiography, journals, letters, prose and poetry, we will trace his journey in search of self and God: how a deepening experience and understanding of contemplation led him to take responsibility for the world he thought he had left behind when he entered the monastery; how he became involved in activism for social justice and

opposition to nuclear war and the war in Vietnam: how he searched for peace was through the way of non-violence; and how, because contemplation led him to a non-dualistic understanding of reality, he was increasingly drawn to the study of Eastern religions as a way of enriching his own Christian contemplative experience. Our study of Thomas Merton will move toward a critical appraisal of his contribution to contemporary religious and social thought.

Studying the life and work of Thomas Merton is an opportunity to explore a host of topics and issues relevant to the study of religion and theology: conversion, spirituality, prayer, understandings of self and God, ways of doing theology, monasticism, social justice, non-violence, ecumenism, Eastern religious thought and practice -- to name a few.

Required Texts by Thomas Merton:

The Seven Storey Mountain (1948)

The Sign of Jonas (1953)

New Seeds of Contemplation (1962)

Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (1968)

The Hidden Ground of Love (ed. by William H. Shannon (1985)

Additional books by and about Merton are available in Merton Room. You may check out any of these books.

Required Materials:

Please purchase a notebook to be used for in class writing and for writing, in response to and in dialogue with your reading.

Resources:

--portraits of Merton in film, including a documentary by Paul Wilkes and a presentation of Merton's life and writing by Msgr. William H. Shannon

--The World in My Bloodstream, a three day Conference on Thomas Merton to be held at Nazareth College, October 6-8, 1988 (schedule of the conference is enclosed)

--an Ecumenical Celebration of Thomas Merton at Nazareth College, November 16, with A. M. Allchin

--guest lectures by William H. Shannon (general editor of the Merton letters, editor of The Hidden Ground of Love, author of Thomas Merton's Dark Path, Seeking the Face of God, and numerous articles on Merton)

--a visit to the Abbey of the Genesee, a Trappist Abbey in Piffard, New York -- If arrangements can be made

--tapes of Thomas Merton's lectures to novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani, available in the Media Center

Format:

Our format will include reading, lecture, discussion, film, in class presentations, as well as formal and informal writing.

Objectives:

At the end of this course, you should have grown in your:

- knowledge of Thomas Merton -- the man and his work
- appreciation of the monastic heritage of which Merton's life was a contemporary expression
- awareness of the religious and social issues that concerned the church and society during Merton's lifetime and understanding of Merton's response to these issues
- appreciation of how Merton experienced and understood contemplation and came to realize the intimate relationship between contemplation and action
- understanding of Merton's work as a theologian
- deepened understanding of the themes that Merton addresses through his life and work: conversion, contemplation, prayer, monastic life, understandings of the self and of God, ways to do theology, the value of solitude and silence, ecumenism, the way of the East
- knowledge of Merton's views on the issues of our times: technology, nuclear war, racism, peace through non-violence
- sense of how and why Merton is an important influence in contemporary religious thought and practice

Throughout the course, there will be invitations to reflect on your own experience, your ideas of the human person and of God, your own sense of what it is to be a human being. Reading Merton challenges ideas and values and invites dialogue.

Course Requirements and Evaluation:

- Regular, attentive, active presence in class (attendance is critical)
- Regular and reflective reading and writing in preparation for discussion
- Satisfactory completion of formal assignments (30%)
- Mid-term quiz (30%)
- Final examination (40%)

Calendar:

- Aug. 29 -Introduction to Thomas Merton and to this course
-Review of syllabus with a focus on Merton's ideas about education
-Video: Merton -- a documentary portrait
-The Seven Storey Mountain: Introductory comments about autobiography and conversion narratives
- Sept. 5 Labor Day
- Sept. 12 -The Seven Storey Mountain (read)
-Discussion of SSM: Merton's early childhood, adolescence, conversion, entry into the monastery
-Video: Msgr. Shannon's presentation of Merton's life and work, Part I
-The Hidden Ground of Love: Preface and Introduction, Letters to Catherine de Hueck Doherty
- Sept. 19 -Another look at SSM: focus on key themes and questions
-Monasticism: its roots and developments (with slides)
-Merton the Monk: Sign of Jonas (read Prologue and Parts I, II and III)
- Sept. 26 -Sign of Jonas (read Parts IV, V, VI and the Epilogue)
-Merton: monk, writer, priest
-Merton's monastic journey: the development of Merton's ideas about what it means to be a monk
- Oct. 3: -No class tonight. Instead plan to attend The World in My Bloodstream, Conference on Thomas Merton, Oct. 6-8, Nazareth College, Shults Center Forum
- Oct. 10 -Contemplation: from Seeds to New Seeds
-Reflections on Merton as theologian
-New Seeds of Contemplation (read chapters 1-6; 8, 11, 12)
- Oct. 17 -Contemplation: continued discussion
-NSC (read chapters 9, 10, 16; 20, 21; 24-28; 29-38 [read as much of this section as you can]; and 39)
-Introduction to Merton's poetry
-Discussion: some of Merton's early poems (read handout)
-HGL: letters to Etta Gullick

- Oct. 24 -Video: Msgr. Shannon's presentation of Merton's life and work, Part II
 -Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (read preface and sections on autobiography, American myth, technology and racism)
 -HGL: letters to W. H. Ferry, Dorothy Day, Rosemary Reuther
 -Discussion of CGB: significance in the Merton story
 -Technology
- Oct. 31 -Midterm quiz
 -CGB (read sections on racism and freedom)
 -HGL: letters to Robert Williams
 -Racism
 -Discussion: more Merton poems
- Nov. 7 -Merton on War
 -CGB (read sections on non-violence, peace)
 -HGL: letters to Daniel Berrigan, James Forest, and the Goss-Mayrs
 -Non-violence: Merton and Gandhi
- Nov. 14 -Merton: the Challenge of Ecumenism
 -CGB (read sections on ecumenism)
 -HGL: letters to Abdul Aziz, Abraham Heschel, Zalman Schachter,
 -Discussion: more Merton poems
- NOTE: Merton: An Ecumenical Celebration, Nov. 16, at Nazareth -- Plan to attend**
- Nov. 21 Thanksgiving Recess
- Nov. 28 -Journey to the East
 -The Asian Journal (read selections from handout)
 -HGL: letters to D. T. Suzuki, Marco Pallis, John Wu
 -Discussion: more Merton poems
- Dec. 5 -Merton's life and writing: his message to us
 -Contemplation in a World of Action (read two essays from handout)
 -HGL: letters to Dom Francis Decroix
 -Merton: the documentary revisited (if time permits)
- Dec. 12 -Final Examination

***The calendar is tentative and subject to adjustment .**

Writing Assignment I:

Background:

The publication of Thomas Merton's letters has begun with a volume of letters on religious experience and social concerns: The Hidden Ground of Love, edited by William H. Shannon. Reading the letters is an opportunity to hear about Merton's experience and concerns, expressed in the candid, self-revealing voice in which persons speak in letters. Merton was a particularly gifted and prolific letter-writer, perhaps because letters were a primary way in which Merton developed and maintained relationships. Merton's letters allow us to glimpse who he was, what he thought and felt.

Purpose:

This assignment is designed to familiarize you with Merton's life and work as revealed in Merton's letters on religious experience and social concerns: (1) through an in-depth study of one set of letters, (2) and careful reading and discussion of other letters. Your in-depth study of one set of letters will prepare you to contribute what you learned when those letters are discussed in class. Your reading of the others will enrich your understanding of Merton and his work.

Task:

Select one set of letters from The Hidden Ground of Love for in-depth study. (Suggestions from among those letters identified in the calendar will be made in class.) Read the letters carefully and explore references to Merton's own work and to the works of others that are mentioned in the letters. Learn what you need to know in order to place the letters in context.

Then write an essay (4-5 pages long) in which you:

first, briefly:

- identify the person to whom Merton was writing (note the biographical sketches preceding each set of letters)
- identify the timespan which the letters cover and indicate what was going on in Merton's life at the time

then,

- identify and discuss the major topics and themes that emerge in the correspondence (focus on no more than three main topics or themes). (You will want to identify and develop those topics and themes with care and discuss them in detail. This means that you have to do more than summarize the content of the letters. You must explore and interpret their meaning.)

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Writing Assignment II

Purpose:

This assignment is an opportunity to explore a topic of special interest to you. Possible subjects include: Merton's life as presented in one (or more) of the biographies currently available, a theme that threads through Merton's writing (e.g. solitude), Merton's writing(s) on a particular subject (non-violence, monasticism, ecumenism, Zen).

Audience:

You are your first audience. You are reading and writing to learn more about Merton and his work. The class is your second audience since you will share your discoveries with the students in the course on the last day of class (5 minute reports). I am your third audience, interested in finding what you have learned, how you can integrate new material into your understanding of Merton, the man and his thought.

Task:

Propose the focus of your paper for my approval as soon as possible.
Read carefully and research your topic thoroughly.

Write a 4-6 page (typed) report in which you do one of the following, depending on the nature of your reading and research:

- If you have selected a biography (ies), write a critical review, exploring the purpose and point of view of the author, key insights the biography offers to a reader of Merton, ways in which the biography complements your own reading Merton (primarily his autobiographical writings), questions you have about the biographer's method or point of view.
- If you trace a theme, show how Merton's thinking on the topic emerged and developed in key writings, being sure to identify the key elements of Merton's thought on the subject and the relation of his thinking on this topic to his work.
- If you explore Merton's writing on a particular subject, identify and discuss the major elements of Merton's thinking on the subject, paying special attention to how and why his thinking changes.

NOTE: Your success in this assignment requires that you check with the professor in advance of your writing the assignment.

DUE: Last day of class

finally,

state what these letters contribute to our understanding of Merton and his work.

As you write, remember that you will be presenting your findings to the class. The paper should focus your ideas in a way that will help you to communicate to the class the insights you gained from your study of the letters.

DUE:

Written Assignment is due on October 10.

You will be expected to share what you have learned in your study of the letters when that correspondence is discussed in class. See calendar for dates.

Class presentation will require a 5-10 minute report addressing the major themes and ideas explored in the letters and their significance for understanding Merton. (You may not read the paper.)

Evaluation:

The assignment will count as 20% to your final grade: 15% for the written paper, 5% for the contribution to class discussion.

Evaluation will focus on:

- careful reading and explication of the letters: evidence of familiarity with content, understanding and insight shown in identification and discussion of major themes, ability to interpret their significance.
- clarity, coherence, and effectiveness of written expression
- clarity, coherence, and effectiveness of oral presentation.