

Thomas Merton: Contemplative Prophet Theology 500

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was, without much doubt, one of the most significant contemplative theologians of the 20th century, and his impact continues to ripple forth in a variety of directions. This course will reflect on his work as a refinder of the contemplative way, the relationship of contemplation to the universal church and the outworking of contemplation-ecclesiology to public issues such as justice, peacemaking and ecological responsibility. The fact that Merton was such a prolific and creative person means we can only lightly land on the sheer breadth of his output, but in classes I will point to primary, secondary and tertiary writings essential to consult for a fuller feel for Merton's life and creativity (including sketches, photography, calligraphy and much else).

The course will journey from the inner contemplative way (and how Merton understood such a pilgrimage of insight and transformation) to the liturgical seasons of the church (and their impact once understood and internalized) to his public witness as a national and international prophet of sorts.

We will meet every second week (for the most part) at Chelsea (our home in Abbotsford) from 9:00-11:00 am to discuss the assigned readings. The requirements for the course are attendance at the classes (in person or by Zoom) and a combination of 30 pages of writing (3-10 pages, 2-15 pages, 6-5 pages or any variety thereof). We can discuss how we will do this when we meet.

Week 1: September 16

An overview of the life of Merton (I have suggested those taking the course read Jim Forest's *Living with Wisdom* over the summer) and a few probes into Merton's *The Inner Experience*.

WEEK 2: September 23

We will be doing deeper probes into *The Inner Experience*---I will discuss other books, pamphlets and articles by Merton on the contemplative way.

Week 3: October 14

We will shift to Merton's journey as a monk and Roman Catholic but also his broad and irenic notion of the church, the focus on the annual liturgical life of the church as markers and pointers for the communal journey, *Seasons of Celebration* our read and discussion place of reflections.

Week 4: October 21

This class will have a double focus—Merton's more existential approach to reading the Bible, hence his missive *Opening the Bible* and how such an approach connected Merton to the counterculture of his time, various types of liberation theology and prophetic politics. We will use my book, *Thomas Merton and the Beats of the Northern Cascades* and the book Brad Jersak

and I did on Tolstoy for this week, Tolstoy a significant writer on peace who impacted Gandhi (Merton did a book on Gandhi).

Week 5: November 4

Merton was known in his lifetime as one of the most significant peace theologians of his era, his book *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* a foundation text. We will also use his missive, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, as an entree to his interfaith probes. Needless to say, volumes have been written on this aspect of Merton's life and the challenges it brought his way.

Week 6: November 25

This will be a round table week in which each in the course will summarize some of their work and reflect on the content covered in the course. I will also, for those interested, point to further areas of reading and research on the life and creative output of Merton. We will, also, reflect on Merton's *The Sign of Jonas* as a finale and adieu to the course.

If you have questions about the course outline, feel free to contact me. The first class will be Saturday September 16—I have listed the dates of the classes below (and above)—perhaps we can have a celebrative pot luck dinner at our home in Advent season—we can decide on a good time to do so when we meet.

1st Class: Saturday September 16

2nd Class: Saturday September 23

3rd Class: Saturday October 14

4th Class: Saturday October 21

5th Class: Saturday November 4

6th Class: Saturday November 25

Texts

Thomas Merton: *The Inner Experience*

Thomas Merton: *Seasons of Celebration*

Thomas Merton: *Opening the Bible*

Thomas Merton: *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*

Thomas Merton: *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*

Thomas Merton: *The Sign of Jonas*

Ron Dart: *Merton and the Beats of the Northern Cascades*

Ron Dart/Brad Jersak: *Tolstoy: Soul Probes*

It is probably best if you order the books by Merton--I have copies you can purchase from me on *Merton and the Beats of the Northern Cascades* and *Tolstoy: Soul Probes*.

I look forward to meeting one and all in a few weeks

amor vincit omnia

Ron