

Theology 198 The Thought of Thomas Merton
Winter, 1989
Tuesdays: 6:00-9:00 p.m.

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Course Description:

Thomas Merton's life and thought on journey as an agnostic who became a Roman Catholic, as a Catholic who committed himself to a monastic vocation, as a Cistercian monk who explored the depths of contemplative prayer and from this experience his commitment to social concerns and ecumenism, especially Eastern religions and particularly Zen--all explored through a study of his writings.

Perspective:

From research done in the 1960's and 1970's on adults in a post-secondary setting, we know that teaching adults at this level requires a different teaching approach than the traditional lecture, research, test method used in most college classrooms attended by students in late adolescence/early adulthood. This is especially true in teaching theology. Adults bring to their theology classes a lifetime of what Tad Guzie (The Book of Sacramental Basics) calls "lived experiences"--important and significant events in their own theological/spiritual development.

In this course those lived experiences of the student will be brought into sharper focus as we examine and understand better the lived experiences of one man, Thomas Merton, as revealed in his own words.

Required Texts by Thomas Merton:

The Seven Storey Mountain (1948)
New Seeds of Contemplation (1962)
Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (1968)
The Hidden Ground of Love (ed. William H. Shannon--1985)

Format:

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

Course Requirements and Evaluation:

Regular and active presence in class is critical.

1. Readings/Reflections Journal. You will keep a reading journal to write down your reflections, insights, questions, and ideas as you read the required assignments each week. You should note important events and thoughts of TM, especially spiritual/theological events and thoughts, especially those that have meaning for you. Questions to keep in mind: How does it help me in my own journey? Why was it significant for TM? What needs clarification? Also note changes in TM's attitudes and thoughts about various issues. (20%)
2. Class Reports. Each week you will be expected to give an oral report based on insights, questions, ideas, etc. that you get from the assigned readings. Particular sections of TM's writings that strike you should be included in your discussion. (20%)

3. Major Paper--see attached (20%)
4. Class Presentation of Paper Insights (20%)
5. Final Exam (20%)

Calendar:

- Jan. 10 - Introduction to Thomas Merton and to this course
 - Review of syllabus and course requirements
 - Video: Merton--a documentary portrait
 - The Seven Storey Mountain--introductory comments
- Jan. 17 - The Seven Storey Mountain (read through page 130, Chapt. 3)
 - Discussion of TM's childhood and adolescence as foundations for later development
 - Class reports
 - Autobiographical reports
- Jan. 24 - The Seven Storey Mountain (read through page 298, III,1)
 - The Hidden Ground of Love (read: Preface, Introduction and Letters to Catherine de Hueck Doherty)
 - Class reports
 - Monasticism: roots and development
- Jan. 31 - The Seven Storey Mountain (complete)
 - In Christ Thomas Merton Found Lasting Peace--Bro. John Albert, OC
 - Class reports
 - TM: 1948-1958
 - Introduction to New Seeds of Contemplation
- Feb. 7 - No class--Mardi Gras holiday
- Feb. 14 - New Seeds of Contemplation (read chaps. 1 - 14)
 - HGL --read Letters to Etta Gullick
 - Class reports
 - Contemplation
- Feb. 21 - New Seeds of Contemplation (read chaps. 15 - 27)
 - HGL--read Letters to Linda Parsons Sabbath and to Dom Francis Decroix
 - Class reports
- Feb. 28 - New Seeds of Contemplation (read chaps. 28 - 39)
 - HGL--read Letters to Abdul Aziz
 - The Spirituality of Thomas Merton by William Shannon
 - Class reports
 - Introduction to Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander
- Mar. 7 - Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (read through page 128)
 - Cold War Letters in HGL # 1 - 29
 - Class reports
- Mar. 14 - No class- Spring break
- Mar. 21 - Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (complete)
 - Cold War Letters in HGL # 31 - 108
 - Class reports
 - Merton and the CIA - Bob Grip

- Mar. 28 - Why Merton Looked East by Dr. Bonnie Bowman Thurston
- HGL--read Letters to D.T. Suzuki, Marco Pallis, John Wu
- selections from The Asian Journal, Zen and the Birds of Appetite, and other sources
- Class reports
- Major Paper for class due/Readings and Reflections Journals due
- Apr. 4 - Final Exam
- Class presentations

Major Paper:

Select one set of letters from The Hidden Ground of Love for in-depth study. 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 from additional research in the library in order to place the letters in context.

Then write an essay (4-5 typed pages long) in which you first briefly: (1) identify the person to whom Merton was writing--note the biographical sketches preceding each set of letters; (2) identify the timespan which the letters cover and indicate what was going on in Merton's life at the time.

Then: (3) Identify and discuss the major topics and themes that emerge in the correspondence (limit your topics or themes to no more than three); (4) Develop these topics and themes with care and discuss them in detail. This means that you will have to do more than summarize the content of the letters--you must explore and interpret their meaning. (5) Finally, state what these letters contribute to our understanding of Merton and his work.

As you write this paper, keep in mind that you will be presenting your findings in a class presentation. Thus, 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.

Class presentation will require a 10 minute report addressing the major themes and ideas explored in the letters and their significance for understanding Merton.

Acknowledgment:

The instructor of the class would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance and help given him in preparing this course by Dr. Christine Bochen, Professor of Theology at Nazareth College and Corresponding Secretary of the International Thomas Merton Society. Dr. Bochen very graciously and generously shared with me her Merton course syllabus (which I borrowed from liberally) as well as her thoughts and ideas about teaching Merton in general. I would also like to acknowledge the ideas and thoughts on teaching Merton passed on to me by Rev. Msgr. William Shannon, President of the ITMS and Chaplain at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York.

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Final Exam: Choose 3 and answer thoroughly.

1. Compare and contrast the Thomas Merton of the "Louisville Experience" of SSM with the Merton of CGB at Fourth and Walnut.
2. Describe in detail Merton's view of the "false self" and the "real self" as found in NSC, CGB, Letters to Linda Parsons and other readings. Give attributes of each, how do we know each, etc.
3. Drawing from your reading tell how you would explain to a friend what Merton understands by contemplation and how contemplation fits into the Christian life.
4. Compare and contrast the Merton of SSM and CGB in regards to other religions and ecumenism. You may also use any other readings you have done for this course in answering the question.
5. What for Merton is the relationship between contemplation and social action (the Christian response to war, non-violence, poverty, injustice, etc.)?
6. Why did Merton "look East" and what did he discover in Eastern religions such as Zen that appealed to him?