

Thomas Merton & Modern Spiritual Masters

Block 2: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday

Instructor: Mr. Percoco

COURSE SYLLABUS

Course Description:

This course will examine the life and writings of one of the 20th centuries most prolific and prophetic voices, Thomas Merton. By studying the life of Merton students will explore his position on issues such as race and civil rights, war, technology and poverty among other concerns of modern America and the world. The first half of the course we will consider Merton as a twentieth century monk, writer, mystic and prophet and evaluate the role of genuine compassion in response to the issues facing humanity. This includes the value of meditation, prayer, activism, and living contemplatively. We will also investigate his search for human and global community/unity through inter-religious dialogue and understanding.

According to Merton Scholar, Dr. Christine Bochen, “In each age, there are people to whom others turn for lessons on how to live. These are the guides and gurus, the prophets and the saints: people who seem to have discovered, through experience, life’s meaning and who have the gift of being able to point others in the right direction, to steer them home, to help them discover their true selves. Lawrence Cunningham names these people “spiritual masters.” A spiritual master is “one who has learned the spiritual way with such experiential exactitude that he or she is able to guide others on that path and serve as an exemplar or paradigm for those committed to its journey.” (Introduction to Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master)”

In this course we will discuss God and his relationship to Merton’s writings. In no way is this course intended to require you to believe in a higher power nor to ask you to suspend your belief systems. Rather it is a course that will open you to the possibilities that come from serious reflection on existential matters. I’m not interested in converting you to anything other than having an open spirit and heart as we dialogue together on these topics. Careful consideration will be given to Merton’s notions of the “true and false self.” What are these? What do they say about the human condition, and what do they say about you?

Based in part on Bochen’s own course “Thomas Merton: Mystic and Prophet” “in this course, we will study Thomas Merton – Trappist monk and writer, contemplative and social prophet – through his writings. Drawing on Merton’s autobiography, the journals he kept throughout all of his adult life, and the letters he wrote as well as his essays, books, and poetry, we will trace his spiritual journey. We will discover how a deepening experience of God led him to take responsibility for the world he thought he had left behind when he entered the monastery. We will see how he began speaking out for social justice and against nuclear war, the war in Vietnam, racism, and other forms of violence. We will learn what he has to say about non-violence as a way of life. We will also discover how he was drawn to study the wisdom of the world’s religions as a way of enriching his own contemplative experience and how his growing knowledge of the world’s religions contributed to his realization of unity. In the process, we will

have the opportunity to critically examine and assess his contemplative, compassionate and unitive spirituality and, if we choose, our own spiritualities as well.” (Bochen, Syllabus).

Additionally, we will study other who have followed in Merton’s footsteps or are of a like-minded nature. These will include selections of readings from Orbis Books “Modern Spiritual Masters” series. Those voices will include, but be not limited to Dorothy Day, John Muir, Jean Vanier, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Joan Chittister, Richard Rohr, James Martin, Thich Nath Hanh, Henri Nouwen, G. K. Chesterton, Sandu Sundar Singh, Albert Schweitzer, Anthony De Mello Abraham Joshua Heschel, Howard Thurman and Hamza Yusuf (not part of the Orbis series).

Readings:

Thomas Merton: A Life of Wisdom by James Forest

The Seven Storey Mountain by Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton: Essential Writings edited by Christine M. Bochen (selections)

The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton by Daniel P. Horan

Thomas Merton: The Hidden Ground of Love – Letters (selections) edited by William H. Shannon

The Monks Record Player: Thomas Merton, Bob Dylan, and the Perilous Summer of 1966 by Robert Hudson and David Dalton

Assessments:

Journals – Will be a large part of this course and serve as a place for you to record your reflections on reading and spur class dialogue. All journals need to be kept in a composition book. Weekly “Musings of the Mystics” will be incorporated into your journals. Journals will be checked twice per quarter. Value – 20%

Power Points – You will create several power points, one of which will be related to those individuals aforementioned from the Modern Spiritual Masters series. The first power point will be based on your reading assigned chapters of *The Seven Storey Mountain* -Merton’s bestselling autobiography. Then I will be assigning you one of the Modern Spiritual Masters from the Orbis Books series. My assignment to you will be based upon what I have come to learn about you as we have collectively journeyed through time here at LSG. The second power point will be based on your reading a book by Merton from the Merton canon. Specific instructions will be provided for each of these projects. Value – 30%

Quests – Periodically you will take a Quest (Combo of test/quiz) based on readings and course instruction. Value 10%

Notecards – From time to time you will be required to submit a notecard based on quick overnight research on a topic, term, or concept. Value – 5%

Class Participation – You will receive a quarterly grade in class participation, which will be based on a cooperative attitude, effort, and contribution to course discussions. Value – 10%

Final Assessment – Your final assessment will be a formal essay in which you will explore how Merton would have addressed specific problems we confront in 2019. You Will be required to integrate Merton’s ideas and words, with proper citation, as they relate to the problem. Value – 25%

Guest Speakers: We will hold two phone conferences during the course, one with Robert Ellsberg, Editor-in-Chief of Orbis Books, and a theologian in his own right, Dr. Paul Pearson, Director of the Thomas Merton Center, and meet with a representative from the Sikh community.

Road Trips: We may take a road trip to the Franciscan Monastery in Washington, DC