

this time, and seemed to sense that Merton was questioning a lot of things about the institution of the Church and monastic life. This was all to the good, because they acted as catalysts, challenging one another to think through their respective positions more carefully and honestly. Merton, it must be admitted, was rather defensive of the monastic charism as he knew and experienced it, while Ruether took a stand challenging some of his more sacrosanct positions defending the monastic life, both cenobitic and eremitic, and its relation to the Church.

Reading only Merton's side of the correspondence, or commentaries by authors who were privy to both sides of the letters, Ruether has often been seen as being too aggressive and negative, whereas after reading all the letters, Ruether comes through as really a thoughtful person with her ideas clearly and intelligently expressed. For this reason, I am glad to see this book making available the entire correspondence.

There is actually a great similarity in the tone of this exchange with the correspondence over the years between Naomi Burton (Stone) and Merton. She had been his agent and editor for many years, and was able to speak frankly, and even quite bluntly to Merton, whereas other correspondents tended to be more submissive and unthreatening. Burton could tell him to stop his complaining and get on with his life. I see something of the same with Ruether who writes with real insight and above all with humour. When Merton chided Ruether on being too cerebral, she retorts: "I am as fleshy as you, baby..." She concludes another one of her letters: "It is a good thing we believe in a Jewish God who has a good sense of humour."

Like "ships passing in the night" this brief but engaging correspondence of less than two years reflects the profound search of two dedicated Christians in the years following Vatican II. I cannot recommend this volume too highly; it deserves a privileged place on any thinking person's bookshelf.

Patrick Hart/Abbey of Gethsemani

For eighteen months, from August 1966 till February 1968, these two catholic thinkers and writers exchanged letters. Ruether, not quite 30, was teaching students in Washington, DC, and having left a passive Roman parish was active in an Episcopalian one. Merton, just over 50, twenty-five years a Cistercian monk of Gethsemani, had recently moved into a hermitage. Vatican II had closed nine months before. Introduced by a publisher, the writers never

met face to face: it is a meeting of minds - of two front-line combatants theologising from personal experience, in the turbulence after the Council.

They agree, Charles Davis is right about the absurdities of the official Church, but see no reason to follow him out. He "absolutised a relative style which we are already surpassing", says Ruether.

They disagree about monasticism. Ruether insists that those who wish to be at the Kingdom frontier of history need to be in the steaming ghettos of the big cities, not out in the countryside preserving a medieval life-style. "Withdrawal from the world" is an illusion. The worldly world reestablishes itself, even within monasteries, and God's Reign establishes itself in the midst of creation.

This frontal attack on Merton's position finds his defences weak. He is himself divided. Part of him joined the monks conventionally enough to withdraw from the world; another part has read Vatican II's reevaluation of the world (*Gaudium et Spes*) and call to monastic renewal (*Perfectae Caritatis*). To deepen his crisis, Merton has just spent the six months up to August 1966 in love with a young woman who nursed him in hospital - a sort of brief encounter enacted at Louisville Hospital, on the telephone, and at picnics in the Kentucky countryside.

Six when his mother died, and fifteen when his father died, Merton had an insecure childhood, and was deeply committed to his monastic vocation and to the vow of stability which made him "at home in the world". Merton had constant problems with the Order over censorship of writings and restriction of contacts. (Equally, the Order had problems with Merton.) He was quite seriously unwell, physically.

Asking herself if intellectual integrity and catholic faith are compatible, Ruether probes relentlessly. She discovers Merton's vocation crisis. He pleads for time. How is he to move, from being a monk withdrawn and apart from the world, to being a monk in and for the world? He has to stay, and he has to move. Could he mark time for the rest of his life? One line of defence is that he is now a hermit, "practically laicised and de-institutionalised."

Ruether is unconvinced. She thinks Merton's relationship with the Abbot is destructive, for both of them. "The most Christian thing you could do for that chap is to tell him to go to hell", she writes.

Clues point to the path Merton would take. In January 1967 he writes, "I love the monks, but they might as well be in China. I love all the nice well-

meaning good people who go to Mass... .but I understand Zen Buddhists better."

The letters evoke the excitement of the Church of the 60's. But they deal with problems still with us. The solutions glimpsed by Ruether and Merton are widely seen as extreme and subversive. The Synod on the Consecrated Life in 1994, for example, preferred to cover up the problems, walk around them, and talk about more manageable issues.

John Challenor

Our Reviewers

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Bits and Pieces

Coming Events

December 14th - Winchester

If you receive your journal before the 14th December, you might want to make a note of that date in your diary. It's when the Society's Southern Region get together in Winchester for a meeting on the Feast of St John of the Cross. 12 noon Eucharist at St Lawrence in the Square will be followed by lunch and then a talk by Revd. Patrick Woodhouse on Merton and Selfhood, followed by tea. All for a modest £5. Enquiries to The Secretary, TMS Winchester Group, 8 Crawley Cottages, Crawley, Winchester, SO21 2PS (Tel: 01692 776664)