

Merton himself reminded us that Robert of Molesme, Alberic and Stephen Harding were the order's founding fathers, since he wrote articles on all three and their relationship to the order's origins.

Merton's later art engages all of him – heart, mind, hand, perception and spirituality – as if expressing a new contemplative wholeness, a perspective longing for its time.

Typically, Merton says of his calligraphies: 'no need to categorize these marks. It is better if they remain unidentified vestiges, signatures of someone who is not around' (p.61). Thankfully for us these marks are still around, signifying Merton's continued presence, calling us to see into the heart of things. Roger Lipsey has done us a considerable service in making these prints accessible in the kind of edition which invites the reader to make many return visits to its pages.

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Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton

William Apel

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By a strange coincidence I had just started reading Jim Forest's foreword in Thomas Merton's banned book *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* when this book arrived for me to review. Jim Forest quotes Merton as saying, 'Whether we

like it or not we have to admit we are already living in a post-Christian world... Not only non-Christians but even Christians themselves tend to dismiss the Gospel ethic on non-violence as "sentimental". The last paragraph of the foreword contains these words: "Were he (Merton) alive today and no longer hobbled by censorship, perhaps he would set to work on updating *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. But many paragraphs, even chapters would remain unaltered". Merton's prescience likewise shines through this book of letters to men and women of different faith traditions, all of whom became his friends.

William Apel explores through Merton's letters to them (including some of the replies they make to him) how a deeper friendship and understanding develops between them both, and, as is frequently noted, a profounder realisation of the common ground that is uncovered. This is a book that can be read by those who are already familiar with Merton's writings or who may be coming to him for the first time. In fact, I would say that the latter group of readers may be very pleasantly surprised by what they find. The book is particularly valuable for Christians and indeed those of other faiths at this time of interfaith meeting and a search for genuine dialogue.

Some of these correspondents can easily be classified. There is a Sufi, a Jew, two Zen Buddhists, a Christian (a Baptist Seminary Professor who is described as "an expansive Protestant") and a Quaker. But with others it is not so easy. John Wu, for example, who was born and raised in China, and was converted to Catholicism as an adult but who "never abandoned the great truths of the Confu-

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cian, Taoist Buddhist milieu of his native land" (p.48). Similarly we see in the chapter devoted to the letters to the widow of the great Sri Lankan sage Ananda Coomaraswamy a broadening out of the concepts of inclusion and exclusion. Merton writes of Coomaraswamy as "the model of one who has thoroughly and completely united in himself the spiritual traditions and attitudes of the Orient and of the Christian West, not excluding something of Islam I believe" (p.161). In other words someone who has truly immersed himself in the different traditions so as to be able to step out to a freedom beyond borders.

James Finlay, in his book *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, identifies Merton as a "Western contemplative who had allowed his freedom in Christ to carry him across boundaries from West to East" (p.62). This is of course clearly elaborated in his Asian Journal and it is in that volume we can see a great deal more of Merton's thoughts and speculations where this might lead - particularly in regard to monastic interfaith dialogue. One of the most valuable aspect of William Apel's book is that it gives us a concise and illuminating introduction to Thomas Merton's 'Ministry of Letters' (Chapter I, pages 1-8).

In this selection of letters then, and the commentary given by William Apel, we are able to have a greater insight into Merton's growing awareness and spiritual development by his correspondence with these nine scholars, writers and practitioners from different faith traditions. It would be easy to quote from each of the nine correspondents to illustrate this but I will restrict myself to just two.

One of Merton's books that became

very popular in the latter years of his life, and a favourite of his, is a translation of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* and it is to his friendship with John Wu he readily admits his audacity to attempting such a venture - "without his [Wu's] encouragement I would never had dared this". Several letters were exchanged and they met up at Gethsemani to discuss the project. When John Wu received the completed text from Merton, he was 'thrilled with it' Wu writes to Merton in November 1965: "you are true man of the Tao just as he (Chuang Tzu) is. You have met in that eternal place which is no place and you look at each other and laugh together... The spirit of joy is written all over the pages" (p.61). High praise indeed. William Apel adds: "the joy that both men felt with the completion of the book was seated deep within, in that place which is indeed no place where true wisdom and faith abide" (p.62). This is as true as any testimony we can find of a deep and transformative friendship.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, did meet up with Thomas Merton at Gethsemani on May 26th 1966. Perhaps because of their common ground as monks the meeting and dialogue that ensued from it had a profound effect on both their lives. Both were peace activists, both committed to a non-violent ethic both struggling with the USA involvement in a war with Vietnam and both were visionaries beyond their respective traditions. We can only speculate on how their relationship would have developed had Merton not died just over two and a half years after their initial meeting. Suffice to say that Merton, in a letter he composed for a meeting sponsored by the Fellowship of Reconciliation, passionately

speaks of "...Nhat Hanh is my brother... I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh than I have with many Americans and I do not hesitate to say it. It is vitally important that such bonds be admitted. They are the bonds of a new solidarity and a new brotherhood which is beginning to be evident on all the five continents and which cut across all political, religious and cultural lines to unite young men and women in every country in something that is more concrete than an ideal and more alive than a program" (Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh, *Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization*, Robert H. King Continuum Books New York 2001, p.19).

In our present situation, these words of Merton need some alteration but they are just as relevant now as then. William Apel's book is an excellent introduction to Merton's prophetic and visionary view of interfaith dialogue.

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Merton's Palace of Nowhere

James Finley
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The late Dom Aelred Graham, a monk of Downside Abbey back in the middle of the twentieth century wrote that in the future people will leave the church, not because they have forsaken

spirituality but for the sake of spirituality. There seems to be much evidence today of the accuracy of this prophecy. For instance the number of Roman Catholics regularly attending Mass has dropped significantly, whereas the interest in books on spirituality and prayer has burgeoned. Similarly there is a great concern over issues of social justice, human dignity, the environment and authentic community. With this as a background then it is interesting that a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of James Finley's *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* should have recently been published.

Just a few years ago, James Finley was one of the keynote speakers at a General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society. Several hundred attended his talk and there was standing room only in the auditorium. Dozens of those attending, including many influential writers, theologians and spiritual teachers gave eloquent testimony to the influence that this book has had on their life. For many of them it marked their initiation into the work of one of the twentieth century's greatest writers: Thomas Merton. For others it was the catalyst that began a life of committed contemplative prayer. All maintained that this was a book that, over the years, they continued to return to for help and encouragement. When asked to write this review I looked once again at my original edition and found that virtually every page had passages underlined.

If I had any criticism it would be that Finley could have spoken more from his own experience rather than simply giving a constant succession of Merton quotes. At the beginning of this anniversary edition Finley points out that the book is a result of five years of reflection on his