

Book Reviews

Cold War Letters

Thomas Merton

Edited by Christine M. Bochen

and William H. Shannon

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There is a centuries-old tradition in which mystics and religious have sent letters of spiritual guidance and prophetic warning to the representatives of power in the world. Thomas Merton was well acquainted with the practice, having written a foreword to Bruno Scott James's translation of *St Bernard of Clairvaux, Seen Through his Selected Letters*, and later quoted them generously in the introduction to his book *The Last of the Fathers*. It could hardly have escaped Merton's notice that Bernard wrote to a stellar assembly of popes, kings, bishops and cardinals as well as other religious, a kind of *Who's Who* of his era. The idea of letters as a medium of political expression had already been planted in Merton's mind.

The year in which Merton wrote and distributed the two mimeographed editions of his *Cold War Letters* is one in which he did a seemingly impossible amount of other writing as well. William Shannon has named it "the year of the

Cold War Letters" which began in October of 1961 during the Berlin crisis and ended with the Cuban missile crisis a year later. Articles poured forth from his pen, culminating in another famously banned (and mimeographed) book, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. *Cold War Letters* gives us a fresh and welcome perspective on the progression of Merton's ideas, this time expressed in the disarmingly personal medium of letters to friends.

The original mimeograph was suitably mysterious: "Strictly confidential. Not for publication" warned the title page, reproduced in the book. The recipients of the letters were referred to in most cases by their initials, and the guessing game began at once: Leslie Dewart's copy, still held at St Michael's University in Toronto, has some of Dewart's guesses pencilled in. The published book, now so much more easily accessible, comes wrapped in information that situates it in history, introduces the reader to Merton's times, friends and ideas, and provides thumbnail sketches of the correspondents as well as an index. William Shannon and Christine Bochen's introductory material is excellent, placing us in the frame of a troubling year. For those of us who lived through that time, however, the greatest revelation is the story told by James Douglass in his foreword: during the Cuban missile crisis President John F. Ken-

edy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev had exchanged desperate communications through back channels (mediated partly by Pope John XXIII) because neither wanted to be the cause of humanity's annihilation. At Khrushchev's suggestion, the two men used the analogy of Noah's Ark for the world they might so easily have destroyed, but found a way to preserve.

The book can be interpreted as a general argument against war of any kind, but the lens through which we might most profitably read these letters in our own time, is provided by the nature of the ban itself: Merton was specifically forbidden to write about nuclear war. The problem was a political one for him as for us. No one wanted to face the fact that these weapons, of an entirely new class, cannot be fitted into any moral framework whatever, although many states have felt that they must acquire them, and the members of the original nuclear club have hardly set an example of restraint. Merton was one of the early prophets of the era in which states could plan to preserve their military assets and exchange instead the innocent civilian populations of each others' cities. Not an easy problem to face, then or now.

The letters themselves, in Merton's persuasive voice (in various different tones pitched to his correspondents) are by turns arresting, provocative and delightful to read. Having decided to collect the letters before he had even written them, as William Shannon suggests, Merton placed himself at the disposal of God's will as to what would arrive in his mailbag and how he would answer. In his selection, Merton composed a kind of self-portrait, gathering a varied cast of

characters as correspondents and a barrage of subjects and styles, from intense and careful discussion of ethical questions with Dorothy Day to decidedly loony arguments with Ad Reinhardt about whether art could exist for its own sake. The book is Merton himself, presented whole in that one year, in letters expressing the pain of it, the arguments and joys and fears and prayers, to an ever-widening circle of people of all persuasions: we can hardly help feeling that the letters are addressed to us as well.

If he was temporarily crushed by the ban from his Abbot General, it is quite evident that, contrarian as always, Merton chose to wear it as a badge of honour, playing it from that first admonition on the title-page for all it was worth. He even wrote as a fellow-sufferer of oppression to Henry Miller, although Miller's censorship problem was of a rather different kind. Perhaps in the end Merton's mood and message in that fateful year is best reflected by a Bertolt Brecht poem: when the regime is burning ox-carts full of books, one of the most hounded (and also best) of the authors reads the banned list and finds his name *not on it*. Impassioned, the poet writes to the holders of power "Don't do this to me! Don't leave me out! Haven't I always told the truth in my books? And now I'm treated like just another liar! I beseech you: *burn me!*"

Patricia A. Burton lives in Toronto and was responsible for editing and writing an introduction for Merton's *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. She is currently preparing *More than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton*, and working on an index of the *Merton Journal* and six volumes of TMS-GB&I Conference Papers.