

Book Reviews

On Christian Contemplation

Thomas Merton

Edited, with a preface,

by Paul M. Pearson

New Directions, USA, 2012

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Paperbook original, 82 pages

£7.99

On Eastern Meditation

Thomas Merton

Edited, with an introduction,

by Bonnie Thurston

New Directions, USA, 2012

ISBN 9780811219945

Paperbook original, 76 pages

£7.99

Two books, same size, different colours, both taking an aspect of the life and teaching of Thomas Merton. The green book is *On Christian Contemplation*, and the red book is *On Eastern Meditation*. Paul M. Pearson has edited the green one. Paul takes on 81 pages, and its dimensions of

10 centimetres width, and 15 centimetres height. The latter by Bonnie Thurston has 76 pages, and its size is the same.

You may, by now, be wondering why so much initial waffle? The answer is, that if the books are going to sell, it is quite important to know

that we are dealing here with pocket-books, but certainly not with pocket-book size subjects.

These books contain a lot of material, and will be familiar to those who have been reading and collecting the works of Thomas Merton since their arrival on the literary scene after the extraordinary success of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. They will appeal to new readers and to old, and will surely lead both into a wider understanding and involvement of the treasure chest that is Merton's capacious writings.

On Christian Contemplation

I read this green one first. We are taken back into those heady, early days of Merton's call to a life of contemplation. Merton writes in the Preface to the Japanese edition of *Seeds of Contemplation*:

'We must face the fact that the mere thought of contemplation is one which deeply troubles the person who takes it seriously. It is so contrary to the modern way of life, so apparently alien, so seemingly impossible, that the modern man who even considers it finds at first, that his whole being rebels against it. If the ideal of inner peace remains attractive, the demands of the way to peace seem to be so exacting and so extreme that they can no longer be met.'

Much of what Paul Pearson gathers for this really helpful dig into the nature of Christian contemplation rests on the earlier classic texts and poems: *The Ascent to Truth*; *No Man is an Island*; *New Seeds of Contemplation*; and for the poems: *In Silence from The Strange Islands* (1957); and *A Man in the Divided Sea* (1946), which took me back to this work of 1946 to discover the who and the what of it all; particularly that 'Man' and what he was doing in 'the divided sea', America and Great Britain perhaps? There are a lot of mysteries to be discovered.

The subjects that Pearson highlights could not be better chosen. Imagine the vast ocean of material that was at hand for him to choose, but helpfully he lights on material that many will know, but will just need their memories oiled, like those issues in the monastic life of silence, distraction, obedience of which Merton was all too well aware.

On Eastern Meditation

Bonnie Thurston tackles the theme of Eastern meditation. There is a deep memory in *The Seven Storey Mountain* about the influence on Merton of a monk called Bramachari, who arrived in Chicago from India with no money. Bramachari was to attend the Congress of Religions there, and by various means, Merton, aged 23, met this monk, and, says Merton, 'I became very fond of him, and he of

me.' That opened up for Merton a whole new religious world, which is captured, in miniature, in this pocket book.

Thurston recalls other times and places, when Merton's interests are fired up in the area of other religions. She recalls the account of the occasion at Oakham School in the late 1920s when he argued the pro-Gandhi side in a debate (and lost). Much later on, Merton was convinced there was a real possibility of contact on a deep level between contemplative and monastic tradition in the West and the various contemplative traditions in the East.

A lot of subjects are briefly covered, and each more mouth watering than the last. On Landscape; Gurus; Dharma; the Self; Zen; the Contemplative Life; Enlightenment; Solitude; Fasting; Possessions; Meditation; Non-Violence, are but a few.

Those of you who know anything about Merton will know he didn't live in a world of half measures. In fact it is almost impossible to conceive how he did all that he did; which makes me think it's probable that these won't be the last of the little books.

There is also a helpful glossary, which in its litany is almost tantamount to prayer. I'll leave you to guess what or who Gelupta is, and the place 'Yellow Hats' has in the thought of Thomas Merton.

One can't help feeling that Merton was deeply imbued with the zeit-

geist of the sixties for better or for worse. Better for the ability to spread wings, experiment, be fearless, or shocking, or both. He lived life at a breakneck speed, absorbing information and ideas as if there was no tomorrow. He is one of the world's phenomena, and it is good that small volumes such as these, of easily accessible material, are being produced for a new generation to wonder at, and be absorbed by.

We are much indebted to Paul Pearson and Bonnie Thurston for all their work—no doubt, in some ways, a labour of love. We are also grateful to New Directions for floating the project into the unknown.

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Thomas Merton: Monk on the Edge

Edited by Ross Labrie
and Angus Stuart

Thomas Merton Society of Canada
North Vancouver, British Columbia,
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In an age saturated with Thomas Merton's own prolific work and the ever-expansive collection of secondary literature about Merton's life and writing, it can seem at times unbelievable that there remains anything new to add to this broad