

# Book Reviews

## Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition

Thomas Merton

Edited by Patrick F. O'Connell

Cistercian Publications,

Kalamazoo Michigan, 2006.

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\$24 US

## Merton & Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness and Everyday Mind.

Edited by Bonnie Bowman Thurston

Illustrated by Gray Henry

Fons Vitae,

Louisville Kentucky, 2007

ISBN 1-887752-84-6 (pbk) 271 pages

£19.99

Reviewed by Patrick Eastman

Both of these books are significant Merton books included in a series. The first is the second volume in a two part set of Merton's lecture notes for talks which he presented to the novices and members of the Cistercian community at Gethsemani in Kentucky in his capacity as novice master. It is also part of the Monastic Wisdom series published by Cistercian Publications.

The second book is part of a series of collected papers given, first at a conference, and then published by Fons Vitae.

In each of the series a number of scholars examine Merton's interreligious encounter with Sufism, Hesychasm, Judaism and this volume addresses Merton's encounter with Buddhism.

*Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* begins with a lengthy introduction to Merton's text by Patrick O'Connell. This is followed by a faithful reproduction of Merton's notes for his classes from 1963 to 1964. They are divided into two series: the first includes an examination of Gallo-Roman Monasticism, Cassian, the Regula Magistri and the background to the Rule of Benedict, and the second part deals with the evidence of monasticism from Syria, Persia and Palestine.

O'Connell's seventy page introduction is invaluable in the way he not only deals with the lecture notes themselves but draws out further insights from Merton's journal entries and letters. Merton's material is complex and demanding but O'Connell rightly points out that Merton's aim in the conferences was not merely to give an historical summary of the various texts but to provide material that would be helpful in the lives of the listeners (or in our case the readers.) We are told that in the text Merton reminds himself and his students of the temptation "to allow knowledge about these topics to substitute for genuine self-

knowledge and humble awareness of the presence of God, to substitute *scientia* for *sapientia*." This also serves as a salutary warning for those who read the book.

There is much to fascinate the enquiring mind but the real value is the way that Merton outlines the work of the early pioneers of monastic/contemplative spirituality. Merton's exhaustive notes stem from his ability to explore the ancient texts, often before they were available in an English translation, and to express the essence of their thrust in a twentieth century idiom. Thus through Merton, with the capable elucidation of Dr. O'Connell, the insights of the ancient writers are brought alive and like ancient geographical explorers they give the foundations from which the detailed later maps can be drawn.

In all of this academic study Merton's humanity shows through particularly in his tendency to become over-enthusiastic about each new author he reads. An example of this is found in his early reading of the journey of the "pilgrim nun Egeria" whom he describes as "my delight.....she is one of 'my saints' from now on."

Prior to reading this book I was only aware from my own studies with a complex graphic portrayal indicating the connections between the pre-Benedictine writers and the Rule of Benedict cleverly drawn by the monastic scholar Adalbert de Vogüé. With this skeleton as the background this book enabled me to put some flesh on the bare bones. It has helped me to see more clearly the emergence and importance of "prayer without forms," to keep one's life simple, to be in touch with the real world and the centrality of Christ in all prayer. Drawing from the ancient

texts Merton presents a deeply Christocentric and incarnational spirituality. We are to be rooted in our humanity "in order to receive (participate in) Christ's nature." It is a question "of learning Christ in the heart by deep assimilation and experience not only in the ear." It is worth noting with all the stress on community these days that Merton draws attention to the teaching of the ancients who perceive Christ as the source of a community that we already have since "Christ being one dwells in the many without there being many Christs."

Dr. O'Connell also points out the connection that Merton sees in some of the ancient writers with Zen. Apparently, he draws attention to the similarity of Philoxenos with Zen as early as 1959. In the conference given on May 19, 1963 Merton also parallels Cassian with Yoga and Zen. This connection emphasises that "simplicity which is a prime essential of spiritual life, and which was normal to Adam and Eve in paradise. Hence it is a description of the 'paradise life' of prajna and emptiness."

It should be noted here that Merton follows the traditional monastic view of the spiritual life as being a recapitulation or a return to the original Edenic life of paradise. He writes, "We spend our lives making our own key to the door of paradise. Each one of us has to have his own key, his own unique way of being restored to true identity, to that reflection of the divine image that no one else can be."

As many will already know these conferences by Merton were the first to be tape recorded and are available for purchase, so Dr. O'Connell provides a useful appendix with a table correlating the written text with the verbal presentation. It is

certainly interesting to see how Merton presents and modifies his text for his listeners. A further appendix is provided for further reading. It includes other material from Merton and other scholars on the same topic.

Clearly such a book cannot be the last word in the study of the roots of contemplative monastic spirituality but it certainly is a significant step along the way and indispensable for those who desire to be enriched from our ancestors in faith and practice.

In *Merton & Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness and Everyday Mind* Dr. Bonnie Thurston has gathered together an impressive group of experts who examine in detail Merton's encounter with both Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Br. Patrick Hart even points out that Merton "understood Zen as offering an experiential approach to contemplation and a world-affirming spirituality."

The book is divided into five parts. The first part provides two introductory essays. The first is a general overview of Buddhism by Professor Roger Corless, a co-founder of the Society for Buddhist Christian Studies. This is followed by a more particular look at Merton's encounter with Buddhism by Bonnie Thurston, a past president of the International Thomas Merton Society.

The second part provides four essays on Merton's encounter with the various Buddhist traditions. The first three essays deal in turn with his exposure to Theravada, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism. They are thorough in their individual approach and the writing style makes them a joy to read. The fourth essay points out the limitations of Merton's understanding of Buddhism. I found this essay the least

satisfactory in the whole book. It has a negative approach and although there may well be gaps in Merton's understanding the tone was arrogant and harsh with some unnecessary snide remarks. On a more hopeful note Keenan, the author, concludes, "He [Merton] was never able to delve into the textual and historical sources of Buddhist thought and practice...but we must go beyond Merton's understanding of Buddhism to engage in the tasks of dialogue that remain before us."

Part three deals with the Buddhist tradition and Thomas Merton's art. The three essays in this section examine Merton's calligraphic drawings, his photography and his poetry. I found these essays to be among the most enriching in the book, demonstrating the way in which Merton's creativity is stimulated through his encounter with Zen in particular. I found the essay on Merton's poetry by Dr. Thurston of extra special interest. She reminds us that Merton was a literary man who, during his lifetime, wrote fiction, poetry and criticism as well as personal letters and journals. The conclusion of the essay is particularly insightful, moving the discussion of the poetry into a very practical outline of the way Zen Buddhism can be appropriated into one's world view and life experience. Dr Thurston summarizes it in this way:

Zen practice was an incarnation of what he searched for poetically and spiritually. The concretized intuition of Zen focuses on the purity and truth of every day experience and insists on abolishing subject-object dualism.

Part four contains "Footnotes to the Asian Journey of Thomas Merton." Five contributors expand the information in Merton's journals of his last encounters with Buddhism and the final days of his life. This anecdotal commentary on the final pilgrimage of Merton is full of his humanity and helps the reader to enter into a whole drama of the trip which Dr Thurston describes as "the outward and visible sign of the spiritual pilgrimage that was his life."

The final section, apart from the usual information on the contributors and the acknowledgements, presents a most useful and thorough bibliography on Merton and Buddhism compiled by Dr. Paul Pearson, who also provides the essay on the Zen photography of Thomas Merton.

The whole book seems to operate on at least two levels. First it gives us a fuller insight into the invaluable contribution that Thomas Merton made to the essential engagement with interreligious dialogue – I say essential because this is how it was described by Pope John Paul II. The book is also instructive and encouraging for those who wish to make either Zen or Tibetan Buddhist practice part of their own spiritual journey. Given the quality of this and the books already published in this series we can now eagerly look forward to the two future editions, Merton and Hinduism and Merton and Taoism.

Patrick Eastman is a retired Roman Catholic Priest of the Diocese of Tulsa USA and an accredited Zen teacher as a Dharma holder in the White Plum Lineage. He currently teaches Zen, and offers retreats and spiritual direction.

### Thomas Merton: Master of Attention

Robert Waldron

Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 2007

ISBN 023257148 (pbk) 101 pages  
£9.95

Reviewed by Stephen Dunhill

This is the fourth book by Robert Waldron related to the life and work of Thomas Merton, each being an attempt, as the author states in the introduction to 'understand more deeply the man who sacrificed everything to pursue "GOD ALONE" (written above the Abbey of Gethsemani's entrance)'. The perspective and purpose is different in each book. Here Waldron states the purpose as being two-fold; first, to offer a new perspective on Merton and his prayer life, second, to encourage people not to give up on prayer. Some of its contents may already be familiar to Society members, as they formed part of the paper *Thomas Merton's Prufrockian Moment Transcended* the author delivered at Oakham in 2006, and that has subsequently been published in the Society's journal for Advent 2007.

After a brief introduction and a six-page well-written biography of Merton, the author starts to examine Merton's prayer life in more detail. For the years prior to entering Gethsemani Waldron concentrates on Merton's losing himself in something other, in particular great works of art, whether it be the Byzantine mosaics he first saw in Rome in 1933, or the paintings of Fra Angelico he saw at the World Fair in 1939; and finds close parallels in the writings of Simone Weil.