

rather laboured. The book, aimed at the general reader, includes many b&w photographs, a brief bibliography, but has no index. It sits on the periphery of Merton studies. If we are to understand the febrile atmosphere of the late 1960s, the urgency of Merton's writings and the threat they made to the established order, better to read his own writings on peace collected together in *Faith and Violence* (1968) and *Passion for Peace – The Social Essays* (1995). Never has his wisdom, his compassion, his vision been more needed.

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Merton & Confucianism: Rites, Righteousness and Integral Humanity

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This volume, the eighth in Fons Vitae's Thomas Merton and World Religions series, is, thus far, the most comprehensive and complete selection of Merton's writings on Confucianism, and addresses a gap in the repository of available knowledge on Merton's engagement with Asian religions and cultures. It is divided into two main sections. The first deals with the Merton/Sih correspondence, reading notes on Confucianism and related material, and his use of the *Analects* in Novitiate Conferences. The second concentrates on commentaries and critiques of Merton's engagement with Confucianism, from 'The Ox Mountain Parable' to a discussion of his interaction with the Jesuit humanist scholar, Matteo Ricci.

It is the latter essay by Wm. Theodore de Bary I would like to focus upon, for it reveals an inherent tension, if not wilful misunderstanding, in the heart of Merton's engagement with Confucianism. 'The Confucian system of rites was meant to give full expression to that natural and humane love which is the only genuine guarantee of peace and unity in society, and which produces that unity not by imposing it from without but by *bringing it out from within men themselves*,' Merton wrote. Yet in other excerpts, we discover that Merton characterised Confucianism as

'decadent', a belief system shaped – even corrupted – by external forces, and does not class it as one of the 'higher religions' with which he was so enthralled.

As with Sufism, Merton was drawn, even obsessively, to the spiritual and mystical elements of faiths. A man who was, at heart, more of a poet than an historian, he failed to appreciate certain crucial developments within Neo-Confucianism (C10th-13th), let alone the interaction of Jesuitical teachings with the systematisation of Confucianism undergone by Chinese state officials in an effort to harmonise ancient and modern disciplines. Merton's anger at the state of the world – his anguish over the Bomb, his passion for civil rights – sat at odds with a practice that was both lived spiritually and incorporated into everything from civil service exams to instructions on maintaining a household. Indeed, he appeared to see the development of Chinese culture, from the days of Confucius, through 'two thousand years of decadence in a suffocating system', as morally unstable. '[Yet] In spite of [this] corruption,' he wrote, 'Confucian scholars [...] remained untouched by what was around them and the Confucian tradition remained pure.'

Merton made a classic error common to Western thought: that the original purity of a faith, religion or system falls away, and that which remains, and becomes part of an organised state apparatus, is contaminated and corrupted. Based upon other of his writings upon the great world faiths, I think it fair to draw a parallel with Plato's *Republic*: the system itself is ossified, turbulent, debased and degraded, while the individual, seeking their own spiritual enlightenment, gazes in rapt contemplation of the beautiful much like the Philosopher Kings, and must therefore eschew, or trim away the shackles of modernity or modernisation to locate a fundamental 'truth'. While idealistic, Merton failed to understand the fact that during civil wars, Chinese statesmen were less likely to cleave to the contents of Buddhist koans or the 'Otherworldly Otherness' of Lao Tzu; instead, they needed a practical, practicable blueprint for living – and living *well*. Having left out such considerations, however, Merton then pronounced that 'many and not the least successful statesmen [...] without the façade of Confucianism were inwardly either pedants, rigid and heartless conformists, or unprincipled crooks'.

This is a bold statement indeed, and draws the historian's lens to the fact that the works with which Merton was engaging were not only incomplete, and misunderstood; they were even misnamed. The Four Books and Five Classics (*The Great Learning*, the *Analects* of Confucianism,

the text of Mencius, and *The Mean*, from the classic *Record of Rites*) were drawn together to provide the foundation of Neo-Confucianism. Merton refers to them as the 'Four Confucian Classics' and selected that which accorded with his view of the personal, unmediated experience of spirituality. And perhaps most damningly, he failed to engage adequately with a seminal figure in the dialogue between Confucianism and the West: Matteo Ricci.

Ricci was a Jesuit scholar, a man of such diplomatic and intellectual ability that within just twenty years he had learnt not only to speak the language, but had become a central pillar of society and a great friend to Chinese statesmen. Inspired by what he perceived as pure humanist principles, he introduced his Chinese contemporaries to the works of Cicero (and even converted a few of them to Christianity). In fact, Merton glossed over Ricci's contribution to Chinese society, and the effect of Confucianism upon Ricci and the other Jesuit missionaries altogether, and dismissed the revived tenets of Neo-Confucianism, claiming that these tenets were not a synthesis of worldly and unworldly concerns – despite the fact that Ricci showed sympathy for both these positions. Ricci's humanism accorded with the Confucian principle that human association and friendship were a process of 'self-cultivation and human governance'. Be it in meditative contemplation – a practice known as 'sitting in forgetfulness' – or in shared values of human interaction and understanding, Neo-Confucianism provided both spiritual and practical advice on how to 'be', which Merton either did not acknowledge, or overlooked.

Perhaps the reason for this, beyond his ideological desire to attain spiritual heights unattained by the application of practical maxims or 'sitting in forgetfulness', a kind of meditative contemplation, was Merton's Orientalist perspective. Orientalism is the way of making the 'East' (including Asia) as 'sensual, otherworldly, very good at religion but not at all good at self-governance', to paraphrase the Arabist, Dimitri Gutas. Rather than concentrating upon the intellectual achievements and insights of different groups within the 'Orient', a vast geographical area that spreads from Turkey to Japan, it speaks of these millions of people, their civilisations and their faiths as Other, spiritual, but lacking the intellectual rigours of Western thought. Just as Merton viewed Sufis and Muslim philosophers through the lens of mysticism, so did he perceive East Asia; and all these great faiths were then further scrutinised from the perspective of Christianity, which, as declared in *Nostra Aetate*, issued in 1965 by the Second Vatican Council, 'rejects nothing true or holy in

these traditions, and that often reflect a ray of that light which enlightens every person'. The editor of *Merton and Confucianism* perceives within that quote a 'clear reference to the Word who becomes fully enfleshed in the person of Jesus, as expressed in the Prologue of John', and, given Merton's profession, such a perception is unavoidable. It does, however, also limit and decrease the importance of the inherent meaning found within Confucianism, not only as a belief system, but as one inherently lesser than Christianity itself.

'I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise,' Merton wrote of the great Buddhas at Polonnaruwa: 'This is Asia in its purity, not covered over with garbage, Asian, European or American, and it is clear, pure, complete.' A fundamental criterion for Merton was the need for *radical* spiritual transformation. In Confucianism, though he granted it some respect, he was disappointed. Merton sought the days in which the early scholars remained 'untouched by what was around them'. In what he viewed as a degraded, materialistic, degraded world, the call to civility and humane love that Confucianism represented was a mere shadow on the cave wall, an impression of a thing rather than the sheer, ecstatic vitality of lived Spirit.

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