

Thomas Merton in California

Edited and introduced by David M. Odorisio

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As the community librarian of 30 years, I am familiar with the numerous books of Thomas Merton which line several shelves of our monastic library. So, I start here with a confession which may help the reader, I admit to having read only 2 of over 50 books that we have before reading the present volume, *Thomas Merton in California*. My original idea that conferences written over 50 years ago may not be relevant to our world of today was confounded by the freshness of the ideas and thoughts of the transcripts. After a few pages it was easy to imagine that Thomas Merton was speaking directly to our world today rather than to a group of religious gathering at the Trappistine monastery of Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey, Whitethorn, California. In May and October of 1968, Thomas Merton gave extended conferences at the monastery. The material in these conferences had remained unpublished until the editor, David M. Odorisio, PhD, of Pacifica Graduate Institute, USA, transcribed the conferences which had been taped on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. The sisters had kept these tapes in the archives for over 50 years.

There is an interesting and helpful introduction to the book by the present Abbess of Redwoods, Sr. Kathy DeVico OCSO, which introduces the background to the conferences and provides a commentary of the relationship between Merton and the charismatic superior in the 1960s, Mother Myriam Dardenne. I would support the advice that Sr. Kathy gives to her readers in the introduction:

However, I would encourage those readers who are not scholars, to imagine themselves as part of these retreat gatherings, anxious to hear what Merton has to say about contemplative prayer, about how God is manifested in our humanity (p.xi).

As you read through this book, it is easy to hear the voice of Merton speaking to each one personally, causing one to reflect on the relevance of a voice from the wilderness of a Californian coastland more than 55 years ago. The foreword explains the foundation of Redwoods Abbey and

also the relationship between Mother Myriam Dardenne and Thomas Merton which gives the conferences a helpful context and setting.

The book consists of Part I, the Redwood Conferences which took place in May and October 1968, and Part II, Letters. The Letters consist of correspondence between Merton and other monastics, friends and acquaintances. It also contains a very interesting appendix about an encounter between Merton and Gracie Jones, a visitor to Redwood, who met Merton while on retreat. Though the appendix is very short I mention it as it seems to me that his encounter with Jones represents the spiritual impact Thomas Merton had on the people that he encountered and the impact that he still has on people today. To read this book is to encounter a very human Merton, the informality of the talks and the response to questioning enables the reader to feel that they were there listening to the conferences in person. The editing is very well done and the gaps in replies and conference notes, which could have been a source of frustration, are well explained in the footnotes and commentary. The footnotes are worth referring to as they provide helpful context to some of Merton's comments, articles and further reading material. I also wonder what wisdom we have lost because of the breaks in the transcripts and the quality of recordings.

This is not a book of systematic teaching of Merton's views on Hinduism, yoga and an emerging ecological consciousness, and prayer but a series of reflections and spontaneous responses to the questions raised by the participants. If you are looking for a textbook this is not the book to be reading but if you wish to deepen your understanding of prayer and spirituality from Merton's perspective, it is extremely helpful. It made me realise that the books I have on the monastic shelves written by Merton have been long neglected by myself as a fellow Cistercian. Fortunately for others like myself, it is never too late to discover the riches of the deep spiritual heritage that one finds in Thomas Merton's writings. One recurring topic that comes across is that of insights about modern consciousness. He expresses thoughts about myriad topics and shows extensive knowledge about a wide range of topics relevant to a post Vatican II church, especially one beginning to be more open to the riches of other faiths. He had already been in correspondence with a number of spiritual masters of Sufism, Zen and Yoga and Merton's increasing interest in Eastern spirituality, especially Hinduism, is evident throughout the book and serves as a bridge to his desire to share his experience with a wider audience. It would also lead to his unfortunate death at the end of the same year while in Bangkok for meetings. Yet at

the same time the importance of contemplative prayer in the Christian tradition is also expressed time and time again. These lectures are not sermons, formal conferences or lectures as such, but the result of deeply personal prayer and reflection and therefore more refreshing in their rawness and honesty as a result of that personal approach.

One of the many interesting sections comes in *Chapter 9, 'Introduction to Sufism'*. Here, Merton explores the mystical tradition in Islam and manages to engage in comparison with a range of subjects from monastic obedience, William Blake, psychoanalysis to hesychasm in the Orthodox tradition. The breadth of understanding explaining this to his audience is astounding while at the same the tone ensures that it is still accessible to readers 50 plus years later. Merton developed some of these points in a later chapter, Chapter 11. Another varied and thought-provoking shorter chapter is Chapter 10 on 'Native American Ritual and Practice' where he describes the practice of indigenous tribes and links it to the psychoanalysis of Jungian practice, especially discussions over art. Some of these diverse ideas are somehow woven together in the twelfth chapter on 'The Interpretation of Dreams, Sufi Spirituality and Religious Inclusivity'.

Chapter 13 onwards contains talks from the October sessions. The focus in this section is much more on Prayer and Contemplation. He also explains his decision to become a hermit and the process involved in this. This section contains more searching questions from the participants and gives a real sense of dialogue about prayer movements in the 60s, about a deeper search for contemplation and about setting up a House of Prayer in the monastery. The October sessions would have formed an excellent separate section in itself and could be read independently from the May sessions if the reader was searching for reflections on the need for prayer and contemplation in our world today. The last sessions continue with a more dialogue, with questions and answers on various aspects of prayer, the beginnings of Pentecostalism and move between Sufism, Zen, prayer and politics. Some of this is more relevant to understanding the culture of the time rather than helping to deepen an understanding of different prayer traditions. Again, there is no systematic teaching in these topics which can lead to a sense of a meandering through a range of diverse areas. One is left with a bewildering sense of the depth of Merton's reading and knowledge on a panorama of religious experience but above all his deep love for knowledge about God's love and action in the world. Ultimately Merton's aim was not to provide answers (See letter to Mother Myriam on p. 395) but to raise questions. I'll conclude with Merton's

prayer at the end of the October session:

We realise more and more how much Your action and Your love is the more important thing. Help us to be open to that love, and open to one another, and to all whom You send to us. Help us to be men and women of prayer, without worrying about it, or knowing it, or wanting to see it (p.380).

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Passions of the Soul

Rowan Williams

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£10.84

This slim and inspiring book is based mainly on a series of retreat talks delivered a few years ago to a group of Anglican Benedictine nuns at The Holy Cross Convent in Worcestershire.

Most of the book is dedicated to considering The Eight Beatitudes of Jesus as a set of counter proposals to the 'passions'. The author asks us to recognise that the 'passions', traditionally understood as 'The Seven Deadly Sins', are not something to be afraid of but an integral part of what it is to be human. They need to be dealt with in a way that not only enhances our capacity to deal with our own inner lives but also illuminates the path which will lead to a life lived in the knowledge that 'we are because God is', to a life lived in the freedom of Christ.

The early desert fathers such as Evagrius and Cassian were profoundly aware of the infinite capacity we human beings have for self-delusion, and the great difficulty we experience when trying to be honest about our motives when considering our behaviour in any given situation. As a way to deal with this Rowan Williams would like us to 'focus on the idea of truthful love as a key to thinking about "passion" and our liberation from it,' and to see 'the eight Beatitudes as a reversed image of the things that go wrong in the soul.' This is not to underestimate the courage and commitment this can take and a