

Merton and Ruether - Reviews of the letters

by Patrick Hart and John Challenor

Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether. *At Home in the World*. Letters Edited with a Preface by Mary Tardiff, OP. Introduction by Rosemary Radford Ruether, Afterword by Christine M. Bochen. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995). pp.108 Paperback £8.99/\$12.95. ISBN 1-57075 015 7.

After reading only the Thomas Merton letters to Rosemary Radford Ruether, I was left with the feeling that there was more to the exchange that failed to come through, like listening to only one side of a telephone conversation. I was therefore pleasantly surprised to read both sides of the correspondence in *At Home in the World*, which gives a much more comprehensive understanding of these two writers. We must be grateful to Mary Tardiff, who did her doctoral work on Rosemary Ruether, for making this correspondence available and providing a lucid Preface to the volume.

At first glance one is amused by the two photographs chosen for the cover. Merton is seen clowning with the photographer, almost as if he were keeping his lips tightly shut as someone shouted: "Say cheese!" He was obviously hamming it up and enjoying it all, looking quite devilish. In stark contrast is the very young, attractive and somewhat demure portrait of Ruether, taken approximately at the time the letters were written. I couldn't help but speculate on the choice of photographs: was it an attempt to "stack the deck?"

Of course, a book cannot be judged by its cover, and once one gets into the correspondence, one is captivated by two fine minds challenging each other with some burning questions. Merton had initiated the correspondence by sending a message to Ruether through Justus George Lawler, a mutual friend and editor of *Continuum*, where both Merton and Ruether were contributors. Lawler had sent Merton a copy of Ruether's "Vahanian: The Worldly Church and the Churchly World", *Continuum* 4 No 1 (Spring 1966), which positively impressed him. He then asked to read the manuscript of her forthcoming book, *The Church Against Herself*.

Merton soon wrote directly to Ruether hoping to get some help with his own questions concerning the Church and the Scriptures. Ruether, on the other hand, had problems of her own and hoped to find some of the answers from Merton. She confesses that she was going through some self-searching at

this time, and seemed to sense that Merton was questioning a lot of things about the institution of the Church and monastic life. This was all to the good, because they acted as catalysts, challenging one another to think through their respective positions more carefully and honestly. Merton, it must be admitted, was rather defensive of the monastic charism as he knew and experienced it, while Ruether took a stand challenging some of his more sacrosanct positions defending the monastic life, both cenobitic and eremitic, and its relation to the Church.

Reading only Merton's side of the correspondence, or commentaries by authors who were privy to both sides of the letters, Ruether has often been seen as being too aggressive and negative, whereas after reading all the letters, Ruether comes through as really a thoughtful person with her ideas clearly and intelligently expressed. For this reason, I am glad to see this book making available the entire correspondence.

There is actually a great similarity in the tone of this exchange with the correspondence over the years between Naomi Burton (Stone) and Merton. She had been his agent and editor for many years, and was able to speak frankly, and even quite bluntly to Merton, whereas other correspondents tended to be more submissive and unthreatening. Burton could tell him to stop his complaining and get on with his life. I see something of the same with Ruether who writes with real insight and above all with humour. When Merton chided Ruether on being too cerebral, she retorts: "I am as fleshy as you, baby..." She concludes another one of her letters: "It is a good thing we believe in a Jewish God who has a good sense of humour."

Like "ships passing in the night" this brief but engaging correspondence of less than two years reflects the profound search of two dedicated Christians in the years following Vatican II. I cannot recommend this volume too highly; it deserves a privileged place on any thinking person's bookshelf.

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For eighteen months, from August 1966 till February 1968, these two catholic thinkers and writers exchanged letters. Ruether, not quite 30, was teaching students in Washington, DC, and having left a passive Roman parish was active in an Episcopalian one. Merton, just over 50, twenty-five years a Cistercian monk of Gethsemani, had recently moved into a hermitage. Vatican II had closed nine months before. Introduced by a publisher, the writers never