

# Book Round-Up

Paul M. Pearson

BEFORE LOOKING in a little more detail at some of the most recent publications to appear it is worth noting some recent new translations of books both by, and about, Merton. The newly formed Polish Thomas Merton Society has issued the papers from their first conference in 2002 in a bilingual edition – *Studia Mertoniana 2: Collected Papers of the First Merton Conference in Poland. Lublin, Oct. 24-27, 2002*. (Kraków, Poland: Homini, 2003 – ISBN: 8389598108. <http://www.homini.com.pl/studia2/>) Like the conference papers from our own conferences there is a wonderful variety and diversity in this volume both from well known Merton scholars such as Patrick Hart, Basil Pennington and Theresa Sandok to many papers from Polish scholars, including the fine paper by the Polish Jesuit, Stanislaw Obirek, which was featured in the Easter 2003 edition of *The Merton Journal*. The range of scholarship among the Polish scholars in this volume is excellent covering many aspects of Merton's life and thought, including papers on Merton and Milsoz, art, poetry, Julian of Norwich, St. Bernard, the true and false self, marginality and Merton's 1966 love affair.

New foreign translations of Merton's work continue to appear, most importantly the first translations into Russian and Indonesian with the publication of *Thoughts in Solitude* and *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality* respectively. A new selection of texts from Merton's

writings have been published in Argentina, *Palabras Con Thomas Merton*, along with Polish translations of *Thoughts on the East* and *Mystic and Zen Masters*, Portuguese translations of *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, *No Man is an Island*, *Dialogues with Silence*, and *The Ascent to Truth*, an Italian translation of *Dialogues with Silence*, *New Seeds of Contemplation* in both Spanish and Chinese, and a Swedish translation of *The Intimate Merton*.

Over the years many of those who have undertaken academic research have proceeded to publish books about Merton, some more closely based on their research than others. Books such as George Kilcourse's *Ace of Freedoms*, James Baker's *Thomas Merton, Social Critic*, and Peter Kountz's *Thomas Merton as Writer and Monk* come to mind. The movement of a work from an academic thesis to a publishable work can be a tricky business – many publishers are reluctant to even consider such manuscripts – and this can also be reflected in the published work. The following two books, by Tam and Coombs, are both doctoral theses which have subsequently been published.

*Christian Contemplation and Chinese Zen-Taoism: A Study of Thomas Merton's Writings*. Eckman P.C. Tam. Tao Fong Shan Christian Center, 2002. ISBN: 9623801653. ([www.tfsc.org](http://www.tfsc.org))

Eckman Tam's book, based on his doctoral dissertation completed at the

University of Ottawa in 2001, is a thorough study of Merton's interest in Chinese Zen-Taoism. In the first part of this book Tam begins by exploring Merton's contacts with Eastern thought from his days as an undergraduate at Cambridge and then at Columbia up to his mature writings of the sixties. Tam defines the different elements of Eastern thought with which Merton was in touch, clearly delineating for the reader his use of the term Zen-Taoism. Tam gives a good overview of Merton's writings on Taoism and Zen, most notably providing the reader with an excellent analysis of Merton's interest in the sayings of Chuang Tzu, highlighting the reasons for Merton's interest, and empathy, toward this writer.

In the second part of this book Tam traces the development of Merton's view of contemplation beginning with the influences on Merton and then examining some representative early and later writings by Merton on contemplation. Although much has been written about Merton and contemplation Tam's analysis of Merton's writings on contemplation is succinct and fresh. The final part of this book examines the influences of Zen-Taoism on Merton's view of contemplation. Tam's conclusion is that Zen-Taoism influenced a number of central aspects of Merton's writing, as well as his experience of contemplation, by expanding his spiritual horizons whilst not shaking his Christian faith. He holds Merton up as an exemplar of an experiential approach to inter-religious dialogue and a promoter of "common core mysticism." Tam however is not afraid to criticize Merton, especially from his own

Chinese perspective, and suggests that Merton may have done a disservice to exponents of Zen-Taoism by overtly theologizing it.

This is a well-written book in which the author moves his reader gently but steadily along to his conclusion, a conclusion which evaluates clearly Merton's contribution to inter-faith dialogue.

*Mystery Hidden Yet Revealed: A Study of the Interrelationship of Transcendence, Self-actualization and Creative Expression, With References to the Lives and the Works of Thomas Merton and Georgia O'Keeffe.* Marie Theresa Coombs. Wipf and Stock, 2003. ISBN: 1592443184. (www.wipfandstock.com) \$30.00

The very title of this book by Marie Coombs, who completed her doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Foundation in Donaldson, Indiana in 1996, suggests an academic study rather than a commercially published book. Over the course of the book this suspicion is confirmed. Very little, if any, work seems to have been done to transform this dissertation into a book.

Coombs begins with a long section discussing the major elements of her thesis – transcendence, self-actualization and creative expression – then looks at each of these three elements first in the life and work of first Merton and then Georgia O'Keeffe, before finishing with a very brief and, I felt, weak conclusion. The portraits of Merton and O'Keeffe are largely based on a selection of their major publications and biographies, in Merton's case the biographies by Furlong, Mott and Shannon, with no

reference at all to the large body of scholarship already in existence on his life and thought. This study also lacks examples of the creative expression Coombs is discussing making it feel ethereal and wooly. Although initially intrigued by a book exploring the creativity and spirituality of Merton and O'Keeffe, which is what I expected from this book's title, I felt none the wiser when I finished reading it.

*Thomas Merton.* Samuel Willard Crompton, foreword by Martin E. Marty. Chelsea House Publishing, 2004. ISBN: 0791078620. £16.95

Over the years three books have appeared to introduce children and teenagers to Thomas Merton; *You're Never Alone: The Story of Thomas Merton* by David Collins aimed at younger children, and two books for teenagers, Jennifer Bryant's *Thomas Merton: Poet, Prophet, Priest* and Cornelia and Irving Sussman's *Thomas Merton: The Daring Young Man in the Flying Belltower*. Crompton's book, like Bryant's and Sussman's, would be most suited to students in their early teens. This book is part of a series by Chelsea House about great spiritual leaders and thinkers aimed at school libraries. Titles already published include figures such as the Dalai Lama, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Mohandas Gandhi and Martin Luther.

This is a well-written volume that gives a straightforward and rounded presentation of Merton's life and thought to its prospective audience. Merton's youthful years and the period of the sixties are both well presented in a way that would appeal to teenagers, though his writing on social issues

seemed a little muted. The book contains a pleasing mixture of photographs depicting Merton along with some examples of his own drawings and photographs, a number of appendices giving the reader some classic samples of his thinking, a good bibliography, glossary, chronology/timeline, and a comprehensive index.

## Book Review

Gary P. Hall

*Rethinking War and Peace.* Diana Francis. London: Pluto Press, 2004. 178pp. ISBN: 0745321879 £11.99

RECENT YEARS have brought a growing stream of books whose authors aim to re-describe or re-assess 'the world we're in'. Diana Francis is perhaps as good a guide as we might wish for when rethinking war and peace. She writes out of decades of experience committed both to understanding the roots of conflict around the globe and to nurturing conditions for reconciliation.

Following on from her previous book, *People, Peace and Power: Transformation in Action* (London: Pluto Press, 2002) – a practical primer offered by this exceptional trainer and facilitator in conflict resolution – Diana in her latest publication returns to fundamentals, 'to the conviction that unless we address the *system* of war and the injustice it perpetuates, [we] are doomed to spend the rest of our days in frantic and ineffectual firefighting...' Her call to us is to go *beyond* resistance to particular conflicts – even to militarism *per se* – in favour of a more sustained effort to re-imagine and to