

## Merton & Judaism: Holiness in Words: Recognition, Repentance & Renewal

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The most daunting thing about this book, which contains some of the finest gems from the Merton corpus, is getting your head round its structure. Achieving that is well worth the effort. The book works on the 'Chinese-box' theory. The outside box is the Fons Vitae series of books dealing with Merton's energising the process of inter-faith dialogue. Merton and Judaism is the third volume of the series and consists of papers presented at a conference organised and chaired by Edward K. Kaplan of Brandeis University, held at Adath Jeshurun Synagogue in Louisville, Kentucky in February 2002, and sponsored by the Thomas Merton Foundation.

That, if you like, is the outside box. Go deeper through the foreword by Victor Kramer, the editor's preface and dedication (Psalm 121.8); the sponsor's preface; the introduction and then the presentation of the keynote speaker, and you will come at last (for those not used to the system) to James Carroll on 'TM and A True Christian Teshuva'. The excitement of the inner boxes begins, and there are seventeen of them, before finishing with three appendices and the statutory mug shots of the contributors.

Sections 10-17 deal with the relationship between Merton and Abraham Heschel (1907-72). Heschel was a pro-

fessor of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America from 1945 to 1972. Merton must have written a letter to Heschel prior to Heschel's reply on October 23, 1960. The first words of that correspondence are typical of the spirit of the whole volume: "Your kind letter came as a precious affirmation of what I have known for a long time: of how much there is we share in the ways of trying to sense what is given in the Word, in the things created, in the moments He continues to create; in the effort to counteract the desecration of stillness. It certainly would be good to meet you. Near what city is Trappist?" Merton replies, and so the exciting act of dialogue begins. Edward Kaplan draws out the significance of the dialogue and comments on it, drawing together the very Jewish witness of 'contemplative inwardness and prophetic action'.

Two other correspondents feature in this book; one is Erich Fromm (1900-1980), the German social psychologist and psychoanalyst. During the war Fromm lived in America and practised as a psychoanalyst in New York City. Merton's correspondence with him stretched from 1954 to 1966. One of the interesting pieces of cross fertilisation in this correspondence is a discussion of Benedictine 'obedience' in the light of the tragedy of blind obedience to Nazi authoritarianism.

The revelation of the book for me, however, was meeting (yes, I think I can say it felt like that) Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Born in Poland in 1924, he moved to America in 1941, and became the founding and guiding spirit of the Jewish Renewal Movement in North

America. Kaplan and Shaul Magid, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Jewish Philosophy in the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, interview Rabbi Zalman. I had to have my pencil with me through the whole book just to keep me on track, and I found myself putting a line down almost every one of Rabbi Zalman's responses. He describes Merton in a way I hadn't experienced before. It's something to do with the fresh, modern rabbinic diction, the stories, and the humour. He describes arriving at the monastery to visit Merton. He gets to the front door and there's a rope to pull with a cross on the end of it. 'And I'm standing there thinking, how am I going to ring that bell? I take the rope a little higher than the cross and I give it a pull. A monk was standing inside in the shadow, but I didn't see him. He came out and said, "An interesting solution to a problem of conscience."'

Seeing the other side of some of the letters in *The Hidden Ground of Love* is one of the great joys of this book. Understanding Merton's deep love of the Word as a creative and dynamic concept is another, and travelling with Merton through the largely uncharted ground of interfaith relationships as it began to touch the Catholic Church in the 60s, is a third. This is the stuff of a 'rattle-bag' of conference papers. If you want a calmer chapter in the midst of the storm then can I recommend the magisterial essay of Bill Shannon, Thomas Merton and Judaism.

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