

reminding oneself that God is always already present within and beyond oneself in gracious love. POC

SEE ALSO HEART.

### Notes

1. See, for example, his comment on Western and, particularly, Benedictine indifference to techniques in comparison with Eastern and Orthodox mysticism in *Entering the Silence*, 402.

## **HIDDEN GROUND OF LOVE, THE: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns**

Edited by William H. Shannon. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985. xiv+669 pp.

This first volume of the Thomas Merton letters was published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985 (cloth), 1985, 1986, 1989 (paperback); by Collins Flame, England, 1990 (paperback); by Harcourt, Brace, 1993 (paperback). It is the longest of the volumes of the letters, running to 669 pages.

The title comes from a letter written to the young students of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, in which Merton spoke of "the happiness of being at one with everything in that *hidden ground of Love* for which there can be no explanations" (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 115). The subtitle makes clear that the letters are about spirituality (prayer, contemplation, love, compassion, etc.) and its relationship to social issues (war, nonviolence, racism, anti-Semitism, etc.). Linking spirituality and social concerns helps to unify the Merton story. Expressing his conviction of that link, he writes to a Brazilian nun, Sr. Emmanuel, that we must take responsibility for the problems of our own country, while at the same time "recognizing our higher responsibility to the whole human race." And yet, he says, "I remain a contemplative. I do not think there is a contradiction, for I think at least some contemplatives must try to understand the providential events of the day. God works in history, therefore a contemplative who has no sense of history, no sense of historical responsibility, is not a fully Christian contemplative" (186-87).

The letters are arranged alphabetically in sets according to the names of the correspondents. Each set of letters to a particular individual is, in turn, arranged in chronological order.<sup>1</sup> Especially in the longer sets of letters, this arrangement helps the reader to view the development and growth of so many friendships that became important realities in the life of this Trappist monk. Friendships did indeed develop through these letters, for Merton displays in them an extraordinary sensitivity to the needs, the problems, and the life situations of the people to whom he writes.

He wrote to an amazingly large number of people. More than seventy different correspondents are represented in this volume. They range from Allchin to Zahn. They cover categories from Allah to Zen. Some of the well-known persons included in this volume are Daniel Berrigan, Amiya Chakravarty, Catherine Doherty, Dorothy Day, John Tracy Ellis, Wilbur H. Ferry, James Forest, Erich Fromm, Thich Nhat Hanh, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Pope John XXIII, and D. T. Suzuki. There also are letters to persons less familiar to the reader, which contain valuable insight into Merton's life and thought. For instance, his correspondence with Abdul Aziz, a Sufi scholar in Pakistan, offers a unique look into Merton's own prayer life (63-64). His letter of a contemplative to the world, written at the behest of Pope Paul VI, combines literary elegance and authentic spirituality in a way that is breathtakingly moving and beautiful. To quote just one small part: "The contemplative is not a man who has fiery visions of the cherubim, carrying God on their imagined chariot, but simply he who has risked his mind in the desert beyond language and beyond ideas where God is encountered in the nakedness of pure trust. . . . The message of hope the contemplative offers you . . . is that, whether you understand it or not, God loves you, is present in you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons" (158).

There are lengthy correspondences with people opposed to war who advocated non-

violence as the only authentic way of resolving conflict situations. Writing to John Heidbrink in October 1961, he says, "I am very anxious to be in touch with anyone who is working for peace at this hour" (402). He was in touch with many such people. It is helpful to indicate a few of them. Wilbur H. Ferry, at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, was most faithful to Merton in sending books and articles that helped him keep abreast of what was happening in the world. Ferry visited Merton and they became good friends. Ferry also became something of a "distributor" of the *samizdat*<sup>2</sup> articles (especially the "Cold War Letters") that Merton wrote to a kind of "underground" readership—a tactic that enabled him to get around the censors. Merton's letters to "Ping" (as Ferry was called) number at least eighty-five. James Forest, at the *Catholic Worker*, was the recipient of seventy-two letters from Merton, letters in which Merton, acting as spiritual guide, helped Forest and others in launching the Catholic Peace Fellowship and became more and more linked with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. In a letter of February 6, 1962, Merton warned of the subtle dangers that threatened people in the peace movement: "One of the most problematic questions about non-violence is the inevitable involvement of hidden aggressions and provocations" (263). In a letter of February 21, 1966, that has become something of a classic, Merton addresses himself to a despondent Forest, who lamented that the peace movement seemed to be going nowhere. "Do not depend on the hope of results," Merton told him. "When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on... you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself... You struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific persons" (294). Twelve letters were written to Hildegard Goss-Mayr, a remarkable woman who dedicated her life, as did her husband Jean, to teaching the principles and tactics of nonviolence as the only way to peace. During the Second Vatican

Council Merton wrote to her, Dorothy Day, and other women who had come to Rome to lobby the bishops for the cause of peace and nonviolence. He also sent them some of his peace writings, which they were able to get into the hands of some of the bishops at the Council.

It should be remembered that Merton wrote most of his letters in the tumultuous 1960s. At times he yielded to the temptation to be different, glib, and offbeat. Yet, as the preface to the volume points out, "He was essentially a man of tradition, striving to recover authentic Christian and monastic values in a time of change and upheaval, during which he often read the signs of the times better and more clearly than others. He never claimed to have the answers to all questions. He did feel certain that he had some of the right questions; and he probed them relentlessly with a greater sense of freedom in his letters than elsewhere. He wrote at a time when the very foundations of Christian life and culture were being shaken. One of the reasons he was sometimes misunderstood was that he was doing a bit of the shaking himself" (vii). WHS

### Notes

1. The Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition failed to give a list of the correspondents. The publishers deemed this unnecessary because the letters were arranged in alphabetical order by correspondents. The Harcourt, Brace edition does give, on pages 657–58, a helpful listing of the names of the correspondents, and with each, the number of letters and the time span over which they were written.

2. *Samizdat* originally referred to the secret publication and distribution of government-banned literature.

## HINDUISM

Thomas Merton's earliest interactions with Hinduism took the form of "encounters" with two extraordinary Hindus. Merton was a student at Oakham when, in 1931, he first became aware of Mahatma Gandhi. Although the young Merton never met Gandhi, news reports of Gandhi's visit to England apparently made an impression on Merton. He recalled arguing about Gandhi with the head prefect and insisting that "Gandhi was right, that India was, with perfect justice, demanding that the British withdraw peacefully and go home;

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# THE THOMAS MERTON ENCYCLOPEDIA

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