

THOMAS MERTON: PATHFINDER

Excerpt from
PILGRIMS IN THEIR OWN LAND:
 500 Years of Religion in America

—by **Martin E. Marty**

No American was a better pathfinder for his compatriots than the Catholic monk Thomas Merton, who died in 1968. His influence lived on far beyond Catholicism, and his life for a generation prefigured many of the courses that people in postindustrial societies were expected to take — though, to be sure, his monastic journey was more strenuous than most. Merton continued the American pilgrimage, seemed “prodded by a dream” and, though he lived in a monastery, was never settled, never installed.

While his Trappist superiors swore Merton to their usual discipline of silence, they did allow him to write. Despite twenty-seven years of self-doubts and attacks by other monks, he wrote nearly fifty books and hundreds of articles. For a time he taught novice monks in the community, but as early as 1947 he began to appeal for a hermitage to pursue solitude. Not until 1965 did officials of his order permit him to move into a lonely hut near the abbey building. By then national fame had come to him for his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and other books that a generation of searchers used to serve as models for their own spiritual journeys.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain* Merton had already foreseen his death and had advised others: “Do not ask when it will be or where it will be or how it will be:... It does not matter.” On this side of death, the pilgrim must always be on the journey, seeking and probing, seldom at rest --- even within a hermitage, where the world of external fact still pressed in on him. Yet as Merton set out for Asia, he spoke for many who would search in his trail, about the “matter of growth, deepening, and of an even greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action.” And then the politically minded monk summed up in half a line words that spoke for countless travelers outside the monastery, words familiar to readers of Maritain and Heilbroner: “Our real journey in life is interior...”

Why bring Merton up as a model or representative of anything? Never mind that a list of his writings is as long as a short book, a sign that he had a following through publishers. Never mind that the list of writings about him has grown to book length and is an industry. No, he was, after all, a Trappist monk. There never were many of them, and quite a few of the few of his generation have left the monastery. Catholicism speaks for only fifty million, not all, Americans, and the monastic voice is a minority even there. Few Americans have time for the intense spiritual journey to which Merton’s call took him. Yet, after listing all the reasons to see him as eccentric, there are also good reasons to post him as a pathfinder at the most recent turn of the road. Often the person of radical vision sees early what others do not see as yet, but learn to see through his or her eyes. Often the person of radical commitment makes footprints into which the more timid can fit their own feet. In a way, Merton can serve this purpose for some readers, though others may have their own pathfinders or exemplars.

Few Americans followed the precise path of Merton and the monks. The sixties and seventies remained years of public action, of attempts to change the exterior world. But through it all, sensitive citizens, young and old, combined the life of action with the interior journey.

Martin E. Marty, who has been called the foremost authority and writer on religion in America today, is the author of more than thirty books, including most recently, *A CRY OF ABSENCE*. The Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Modern Christianity at the University of Chicago, he is a recipient of the National Book Award and more than twenty honorary degrees. In 1967, he published an open letter to Merton “Thomas Merton: re: your prophecy,” *NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER* 3 (30 August 1967): no. 43, p. 6. Merton replied in the next issue in “Negro violence and white non-violence: letter to Dr. Martin E. Marty,” *NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER* 3 (6 September 1967): no. 44, p. 8.