

Wisdom Ever Ancient, Ever New

Review of

Merton & the Tao: Dialogues with John Wu and the Ancient Sages

Edited by Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes

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Reviewed by **Alan Kolp**

Readers of Thomas Merton know that he developed an interest in and appreciation of people from a variety of spiritual traditions. Secluded in the isolation of the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton's expansive heart became quite inclusive of women and men in these various traditions. This current volume is the fifth in the Fons Vitae Thomas Merton Series "for the study of world religions through the lens of Thomas Merton's life and writing" (x). Prior volumes focused on Sufism, Hesychasm, Judaism and Buddhism.

The general reader may know about Merton's publication of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965) and be aware of his friendship with John Wu, who helped Merton understand Taoism and the wisdom of Chuang Tzu. Compared to Buddhism or Judaism, the general reader is less likely to have much familiarity with Taoism (Daoism in contemporary scholarship). Hence this volume edited by Cristóbal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes is a welcome addition for a broader and deeper understanding of Merton.

The book is divided into six parts. Part I is a very helpful introduction for those who know little or nothing about Taoism. The Daoist scholar Livia Kohn opens with a basic look at Daoist traditions. She helps the reader understand the basic meaning of the concept of Daoism and also treats other key ideas in the Daoist religious tradition, such as *qi* ("vital energy," as it is translated [9]). This section is followed by an essay from the volume's editor, who examines the mystical teaching of the central Daoist concept of *wu-wei* as a way of looking at spiritual detachment in the East and West. While the chapter by Kohn does not deal with Merton, this second piece begins to show why Merton would have been intrigued by Daoism. For example, according to the author Merton connected *wu-wei* as the "mode of action of the Dao itself" (38) with the spontaneous movement of the Holy Spirit.

Part II has three chapters looking at the relationship of Merton and the ancient philosopher Chuang Tzu. Lucien Miller shows the reader who the fourth-century B.C.E. (for Merton) Chuang Tzu was in Merton's understanding. This is an especially helpful article because it allows the reader to understand how Merton actually engaged in the writing process of *The Way of Chuang Tzu* and assists the reader to understand the entire rest of the book *Merton & the Tao*. This section is followed by Bede Bidlack's critique of Merton's *Way of Chuang Tzu*. It is particularly useful by differentiating the limitations Merton brought to the task of writing his book from the amazing skill with which he addressed the work. In the next article Donald P. St. John offers a fascinating perspective on

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ecological wisdom in Merton's *Chuang Tzu*. Through five meditations St. John takes the reader to deep places with cosmic expansiveness.

Part III is a very touching section because it is so personal. The focus is on the spiritual friendship of Merton and John C. H. Wu (1899-1986). The first chapter is written by John Wu, Jr., who introduces the reader to the relationship between his father and Merton, traced through their correspondence covering more than six years (1961-1968). The elder Wu was fluent in the worlds of jurisprudence, literature, philosophy and mysticism. Born in China, educated in the United States and a teacher in both places, Wu was truly a global citizen. One year before Merton's own conversion, Wu was baptized into the Catholic Church. No doubt, their common faith augmented what came to be a graced friendship. In the second section of Part III Lucien Miller introduces the Merton-Wu letters. Merton initiated the connection when he asked Wu to help him understand Confucian and Taoist mysticism. Specifically, Merton asked Wu to help him with the *Chuang Tzu* translation. The letters are a rich trove of two men's hearts, humor and humility.

Part IV is the actual correspondence. For many readers, this will be the central attraction of *Merton & the Tao*. It is heartwarming to trace the developing friendship from Merton's initial request for help in his letter of March 14, 1961. In a letter dated November 16, 1965 John Wu acknowledges, "Between true friends the Lord Himself serves as the postman" (298). In the summer of 1962 Wu was able to visit Gethsemani for a face-to-face encounter with Merton. The person with a general knowledge of Merton might only know snippets about John Wu from the occasional mention in a work such as *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. This collection of letters paints a much richer portrait of Wu and of the relationship between the two spiritual friends. The range of topics covered in these letters is breathtaking. One sees the genius of two men engaged in the intellectual and spiritual adventure of living into the very Mystery of God. A taste of this adventure can be seen in a couple sentences Wu penned in 1965. To Merton, Wu said, "Only a contemplative like you can burn with such Christ-Love as you have radiated in all your letters. You are mad with the very madness of Christ, yet this madness is a mysterious blend of the Fire of Love and the Water of Wisdom" (265). In that same summer of 1965 Merton wrote to Wu: "And to encounter living in you the spirit of *Chuang Tzu* himself with such liveliness and force is, I must say, an experience. . . . Naturally, I want to dedicate the *Chuang Tzu* book to you . . . and we will all fly away on the back of the same dragon" (272).

Part V offers a particularly interesting generational angle on Merton and Wu. This brief section contains the collected letters of Merton and John Wu, Jr., the ninth son (and thirteenth child) of John Wu. John Wu, Jr. visited Merton at Gethsemani only once, in the summer of 1968, on his honeymoon. Although the letters have some inherent interest, this section does not carry the weight that the earlier sections do. One senses that Merton is being cordial to Wu's son, but the commitment and substance of the relationship is not significant.

The final section, Part VI, contains reflections ("Centennial Vignettes," as they are called [367]) by John Wu, Jr. about his father. Here emerges the portrait of a curious, erudite, Renaissance type of man. As the son describes his father, the reader gets a deeper sense of John Wu, the person Merton knew and valued, both as a collaborator as well as spiritual friend. To read about John Wu is to gain an awareness of the person and, through the person, an awareness of the Spirit working through him. Doubtless it was that spirit and the Spirit that attracted Merton.

There are many reasons why this book is satisfying. Three in particular can be cited. First, the thematic focus on Merton and Taoism is clear and serves a useful purpose. There are many people who know a great deal about Merton and another group who know about Taoism, but not very many are able to connect and appreciate the two together. Secondly, the book is a foundational resource for a basic knowledge of Taoism, and especially for an awareness and appreciation of how Merton understood and worked with it. Finally, the book illuminates one aspect of Merton's spiritual development in the last decade of his life. Most folks know how significant the 1960s were for Merton's ongoing growth. With this book Merton readers and scholars can more fully appreciate how the Taoist religious tradition and Merton's friendship with John Wu and others played a role in his ongoing spiritual journey.