

“Das ist Mein persönliches Gefühl”

A Conversation with Brother Patrick Hart

Originally Published in West Germany

by **Kurt Remele**

Remele: *In the German-speaking countries you can now see some kind of Merton renaissance. The Seven Storey Mountain has been reprinted and Monica Furlong's biography has been translated into German. His collected writings on peace and Contemplation in a World of Action have also been translated and published.¹ So there is a renewed interest in Merton in Europe and there has always been a wide interest in the United States. Since Merton's death in 1968 numerous books and articles about him and his work have been published and the number of theses is over one hundred. The official Merton biography by Michael Mott was on The New York Times bestseller list for ten weeks.² What do you think is the main reason for Merton's ongoing popularity?*

Hart: I think the reason that Merton continues to be of interest to Europeans as well as Americans especially in the last decade or so has been because of his interest in social problems and also his interest in the Far East and Zen. I think that has made him a very popular kind of writer, whose message is still relevant for us. In a sense, we haven't really understood the full import of this message and I think it's being decoded now by commentators with the official biography by Michael Mott, especially. Right after his death, of course, there was a great deal of interest but then it tapered off in the late seventies, but now with the letters coming out, the biography and eventually his journals, I foresee a greater renewal of interest in his work.

Remele: *Will further journals be published?*

Hart: The private journals will not be published for another six years. There is a restriction of twenty-five years from the time of his death provided the authorized biography would be out to provide a

□ **Kurt Remele** attended Graz University in Austria and is currently Lecturer in Catholic Social Ethics at the Ruhr-University in Bochum, West Germany. He is the author of "Monch -- mitten in der Welt: Zum Friedensengagement von Thomas Merton," *Orientierung* [Zurich] 48:5 (15 March 1984). This interview with Brother Patrick Hart was conducted at the Abbey of Gethsemani and first published in *Geist und Leben* [Wurzburg] 60:2 (March-April 1987).



BROTHER PATRICK HART

Photo by Gregory J. Ryan

context. That was one of his stipulations and then the Trustees are free to publish the journals serially. My own feeling is that Merton will never be completely understood until the correspondence and the journals are published. In fact, I think it is almost premature to do a "definitive biography" at this point. The Mott book is good and it's really quite adequate for the time being, but it is not the last word. There will be a more comprehensive biography, I am sure, in fifteen or twenty years from now. There will be a more critical distance from him, which is needed to come up with a definitive work.

Remele: *When I read some of Merton's letters in The Hidden Ground of Love and compared them to a book I recently read, Life and Holiness which was published in 1963, I could easily see that Merton's style of writing varies considerably. Apart from the fact that books on spiritual direction and personal letters obviously are two different literary genres, would you say that not being censored in his letters allowed Merton to express things he couldn't say otherwise?*

Hart: Yes, that is why I think we will never know Merton until the journals and all his letters are published and made available because he is speaking without any concern for censorship. Also I think the whole question of dating is important. *Life and Holiness*, as you say, was published in 1963, which means it was written in 61 or 62 or before while almost all the letters are from 63 on. Vatican II came in there along with its inherent excitement and much more of an openness and a good critical spirit. But to go back to your first question: Why is Merton read and appreciated? I think it is the very manner in which he wrote, the style, he wrote in a very personal way that revealed himself. Some have said that everything he wrote was autobiographical. He entered into his writing in a personal way so that the reader could identify with him in his struggle, whether it was his vocational struggle or his coming to terms with this whole nuclear buildup or the race question. Those were things that he was struggling with himself and I think the reader senses that and says: "I can identify with that, I know where he's at, I've been going through that myself." So I think that is part of the reason why readers find him helpful for their own journey.

Remele: *Brother Patrick, you spoke favorably about Michael Mott's biography. I've read some reviews that have been quite favorable, too. Charles E. Kinzie, on the other hand, criticizes that Mott dismisses too easily the idea that Merton's death in Bangkok could have been anything other than an accident. Kinzie hints at the possibility of political assassination by order of the US government, but there are also rumors of its being a suicide. Are these rumors of assassination and suicide totally absurd?*

Hart: I find this kind of irresponsible rumor ridiculous. After very careful checking of the death certificate, speaking with the witnesses at the Bangkok meeting, and knowing his medical history, it does not seem it could be either a case of assassination or suicide. The overwhelming evidence is rather that it was accidental electrocution by a faulty fan.

Remele: *I stayed at Jonah House⁴ in Baltimore with Philip Berrigan and other peace activists for a couple of days. They treasure Thomas Merton there very much. But Philip Berrigan told me that he feels that for many people Merton has become some kind of intellectual exercise. They read his books but it does not affect and change their lives. So there is some kind of a Merton cult but really not an implementation of the things he said in their own lives. Would you agree?*

Hart: I would have to challenge that statement. It would be very hard to poll all the readers and find out and check: "Has this affected your life?" My experience even with people doing doctoral dissertations has been just the opposite. I have talked to nearly a hundred people who have done master's and doctoral dissertations on Merton and nearly everyone confessed when they finished it: "This has meant more to me than simply an academic exercise. Merton

has changed my life. I see things totally different now.” How can you judge this kind of interior metanoia of the person’s heart, how he approaches life and even in his personal family life how he relates to members of his family, his wife, his children? Those are things that are pretty secret. You can’t get a poll of that. Now I admit there could be in some areas a bit of a cultic thing going. I don’t see it here at Gethsemani. I believe that Merton is criticized rather freely here and I think that is what he would want to be done. Critically, not just swallowing him whole and maintaining that everything he says was from on high and inspired. He was struggling, too, and I think he had a lot of insight, but he didn’t feel that he had the last word on every subject. And he certainly wasn’t drawing people to himself as a cult figure and he encouraged their living at their own deepest level, the true self. I think people very much involved in peace activism can be living a very false ego-trip kind of existence, too, unless they are careful not to forget about the deepest and the true self from which they should be operating. I think that these are dangers which Merton pointed out for all of us, contemplatives as well as activists. We are all needed in the Church, not in a competitive kind of way, but we complement one another and we do what we feel is a response to our personal vocation.

Remele: *Brother Patrick, let me ask you one last question that would be of particular interest to many Europeans: both Ernesto Cardenal and Daniel Berrigan were close to Thomas Merton. The former was a novice here at Gethsemani and the latter was in contact with him. Cardenal claims that Merton would have supported the Nicaraguan revolution but Daniel Berrigan is more cautious with regard to such a statement. What is your personal opinion? Can anybody claim Merton? Is it in fact possible to say what Merton would have thought?*

Hart: That’s a very hypothetical question and it is hard to answer. But there was a consistency in Merton’s nonviolence as a way of life and I would be inclined to agree with Dan Berrigan that Merton would have opted for the peaceful solution rather than resorting to arms, I think, even to overthrow an unjust government. Admittedly, the Somozas had to be overturned but I don’t think that in the long haul violence is the solution. Violence breeds violence and I think that once you get caught in that circle, it’s a vicious circle and it’s very hard to get out of it. Having read David Givney’s work⁶ and also Gordon Zahn’s⁷ and Dan Berrigan’s, too, I would be inclined to agree with Dan that guns aren’t the solution to the problem, or bombs for that matter either. I wouldn’t be too sure that Merton would have turned violent and joined the revolutionaries nor do I think that Gandhi would have although Ernesto claims that both Gandhi and Merton would have turned revolutionary in this situation. That’s a very difficult thing to say: I just would not be too sure when people say that he would have; I would be more inclined to say that he probably wouldn’t have taken up arms. That would be my personal feeling.

Remele: *Thank you very much, Brother Patrick.*

1. Thomas Merton, *Der Berg der sieben Stufen. Autobiographie.* (Köln: Benziger, 1985); Monica Furlong, *Alles, was ein Mensch sucht. Thomas Merton, ein exemplarisches Leben* (Freiburg: Herder, 1982); Thomas Merton, *Gewaltlosigkeit. Eine Alternative*; edited by Gordon C. Zahn (Köln: Benziger, 1986); and Thomas Merton, *Im Einklang mit sich und der Welt.* (Zürich: Herder, 1986).

2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

3. Cf. *National Catholic Reporter* 21:11 (11 January 1985): pp. 9, 21.

4. Jonah House is a community of resistance to nuclear arms. It was founded by Philip Berrigan, his wife Elizabeth McAlister, and others in 1973.

5. Cf. Ernesto Cardenal’s contribution to *Merton, By Those Who Knew Him Best*; edited by Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984): pp. 34-39; and Daniel Berrigan, “Too Heavy a Price,” *IFOR Report* (December 1978): pp. 10-11.

6. David Givney, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: the Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983).

7. Gordon C. Zahn, “Original Child Monk: an Appreciation,” in *Thomas Merton on Peace* (New York: McCall’s, 1971): pp. ix-xli; “Thomas Merton: Reluctant Pacifist,” in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*; edited by Gerald S. Twomey (New York: Paulist Press, 1978); and “Thomas Merton as Prophet and the Spirituality of Peace,” *Cistercian Studies* 20:2 (1985): pp. 142-153.