

MERTON:

ISLANDS, *THE NEW YORKER*, AND OTHER CONNECTIONS

by **Robert E. Daggy**

Very often my activities at the Thomas Merton Studies Center, which increasingly functions as a clearinghouse for information about Merton and his works, seem to connect in an odd and sometimes disconcerting way. In a recent week, not unlike other weeks at the Merton Center, materials came in which demonstrated this kind of connection.

While sitting at lunch one day a colleague showed me a recent issue (9 January 1989) of *The New Yorker* which carried (on page 31) a cartoon which would, I am sure, have amused Merton. Anyone familiar with his writings would think immediately of his 1955 book, *No Man is an Island*, perhaps before they thought of John Donne from whom Merton took the title. The cartoon reproduced on the next page was probably prompted more by Donne (or possibly simply by the fact that the phrase has entered our collective consciousness) than by Merton's book. Yet it points up part of Merton's message that, in our time, even though we may not be — and know we are not — islands, some of us get so alienated, so frustrated, so turned-off, that — with grumpy visages — we think we don't want to be "part of the main" or "pieces of the continent" and would be just as glad to be able to say: "I am an island!"

Back on my desk at the Merton Center, I thought as I munched my lunch, lay three things which made this Miller cartoon especially timely. One of these was a brochure from CommUniversity, the community education wing of the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. On Sundays in February, Dr. Dan Rice will conduct a class entitled "No One is an Island: The Life and Thought of Thomas Merton." Rice is an assistant professor of educational administration at the University of North Dakota Graduate Center in Bismarck and an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church. He suggests as readings "Any of Merton's many writings," a somewhat dissembling assignment considering the vastness, the gigantic "geography" of the Merton corpus. But it is interesting that he is emphasizing Merton's own sense of connections among human beings.

At the same time, I received the galley proofs for *The Road to Joy: Thomas Merton's Letters to New and Old Friends*, which is due for publication by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in August 1989. As I proofed, references to *The New Yorker*, coming so soon after seeing the cartoon, struck me particularly. This second volume of the Merton letters includes early ones to his friends Mark Van Doren and Bob Lax, letters full of references to *The New Yorker*, to which Merton and his friends were submitting poems during and immediately after their Columbia days. Bob Lax, in fact, worked for *The New Yorker* for a time and Merton relates several humorous stories about his time on their editorial staff. Merton told Van Doren, in a letter written during Lent 1941: "Secretly I am convinced that [*The New Yorker*] is the only good magazine in New York." Even at Gethsemani, though he certainly saw it much less regularly, it remained one of his favorite

magazines. In 1966 he wrote two letters to the editors of *The New Yorker* which will be included in *The Road to Joy*. In the second of these, dated 5 November 1966, he said:

I hate to keep pestering the "Talk of the Town," but I can't help it. If I am a little late in commenting on the Talk of the Town of Aug. 27, you must realize that a monk gets his *New Yorkers* surreptitiously and at long intervals. I would like to say just this: about the piece on John Lennon, Alotrios, the Beatles and Jesus. This is the first piece of theological writing since the Fathers of the Church that has moved me to tears. Whoever wrote it is my brother. He makes a lot of sense. Most of the official theologians don't. Thank you very much. For this kind of thing I love all of you very much. Keep it up.

Finally, there was on my desk a letter from Arline Newton of Lincoln, Nebraska, who has been doing good service in coordinating information about chapters of the International Thomas Merton Society and Merton events, such as, among others, R. B. Kearns's talk, "Merton's Contribution to Faith and Thought in Our Times," delivered in Hokierga, New Zealand, on November 16 and 19, 1988. Realizing that many people interested in Merton feel themselves isolated and cut-off — "islanded" as it were — from activities, chapters, events and so on, Ms. Newton has conceived a new activity for the ITMS. She calls it: **Friends of Merton — A Wider Fellowship** and has asked that I share the following statement in *The Merton Seasonal*:

Because of continuing interest in Thomas Merton, people around the country have written asking for the location of a nearby ITMS chapter. Sometimes there is not one in their immediate area to which we can refer them.

We would like to provide an opportunity for friends of Merton to join a wider fellowship by mail. A group of four or five people will be grouped together to share their own experiences of Merton by an add-on letter that circulates among them. If desired, material could be made available to offer guidelines for studying one particular book by or about Merton.

If you would like to be a part of this wider fellowship, write to **Ms. Arline Newton, Friends of Merton, 1801 East Manor Drive, Lincoln NE 68506.**

In your letter please tell a little about yourself, how you became interested in Merton, which books you have read or particularly favor and which book you'd like to consider in a **Friends of Merton** group.



THIS MAN IS AN ISLAND.

From *The New Yorker* (9 January 1989)

Reprinted by Permission