

# MERTON AS CATHOLIC ROMANTIC

Review of

James Terence Fisher

*THE CATHOLIC COUNTERCULTURE IN AMERICA, 1933-1962*

Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1989

xv, 305 pages / \$30.00 hardcover

Reviewed by **John Dear**, S. J.

It is nearly unanimous: the Catholic Church in the United States today is in crisis. The signs of its rapid change — some would say its decline and fall — are everywhere: the mass exodus from the church, especially among women; the declining number of candidates for the priesthood; the rising protest against the refusal to ordain women to the diaconate and priesthood; increasing hostility against hierarchical, patriarchal church structures; a deepening division between the powerful elite and those who side with the poor and marginalized; and the inability to embrace fully African and Hispanic Americans into the church.

Beyond these conflicts, however, are some signs of hope. Many Catholics remain committed to becoming a more just, prophetic community, faithful to the Gospel preference for the poor in the nonviolent struggle for liberation. Such strands of division and promise within the church can trace their roots, according to a new book, to the emerging Catholic counterculture of the 1930s.

In this first history of twentieth-century U. S. “Catholic romanticism,” Yale historian James Fisher tells the story of this developing Catholic counterculture through character portraits of Dorothy Day, Carol Jackson, Tom Dooley, Thomas Merton and Jack Kerouac. “This study is primarily concerned with the self-expression of figures I have chosen as representative of the evolution of American Catholic culture between the early 1930s and the late 1950s.” Regarding Day and Merton, the two most prominent personalities, Fisher confesses from the start: “I am strictly concerned with their meaning for the culture of American Catholics.” His thesis declares that their efforts to create a Catholic counterculture failed, and that they instead aided the disintegration of Catholic culture itself.

Fisher begins with Dorothy Day’s conversion to Catholicism and what he calls her invention, in the 1930s, of American Catholic romanticism — the personalism which linked personal spirituality to the suprapersonal unity of Catholics within the Mystical Body of Christ. As the “immigrant church” transformed itself into a variety of “spiritual, communitarian, and literary experiments,” Fisher concludes that Day failed to sustain the radical Catholic counterculture that she hoped to create.

After analyzing *Integrity* magazine and its leadership under Carol Jackson and Ed Willock,

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Fisher proceeds to outline the shift in personalist consciousness from a “militantly Catholic” to a more indigenously American mode of romantic self-expression. Through the lives of Dr. Tom Dooley and novelist Jack Kerouac, Fisher attempts to show how their experiences signaled a new Catholic appreciation of the American tradition of creative freedom. The shameful “mystic anticommunism” and blind patriotism of Dooley is certainly noteworthy as a lesson in mixed motivations — and plain old bad faith — but here Fisher dwells too long on the peculiar details of the Dooley saga.

The final chapter compares the lives of Thomas Merton and Kerouac to demonstrate that, by the early 1960s, Catholic culture could no longer sustain a vision of itself as radically alien from the main currents of American life. “The Trappist monk Thomas Merton and ‘beat’ novelist Jack Kerouac were the most gifted Catholic romantics of the postwar era,” Fisher states. “Merton moved from the convert triumphalism of the 1940s to the global mysticism of the 1960s, while Kerouac went from immigrant American romanticism to bitter parody of ethnic resentment. In the end the disparity between the genteel convert and the immigrants’ son meant less than their shared literary vocation, because the unraveling of Catholic culture in the 1960s offered the burdens of freedom as their crosses to bear.

The concluding comparison between Merton and Kerouac, both Columbia University graduates, does not work. Fisher could have gone deeper into Merton’s influence on the culture and counterculturalization of American Catholics. More thought could have been given to Merton’s evolution, from fervent convert to prolific yet pious Trappist to mystic, seeker, peace activist, and mediator with Eastern religions. Kerouac mourned the loss of the immigrant Catholic culture; Merton’s influence and ideas far surpassed Kerouac, as well as Dooley, Jackson, or Willock. Fisher notes that “although Merton would grow, painfully, into engagement with the suffering of the world, he owed his initial fame to an account of leaving that world for the timeless peace of monastic life.” Yet Fisher fails to grasp that Merton truly helped many Catholics rededicate themselves to the creation of a nonviolent world. The inherent flaw in this all-too-brief reflection on Merton’s contribution to American Catholicism is that it ends precisely when he breaks beyond the boundaries of Catholicism to where Merton stood with Dorothy Day as a Catholic prophet to the nation and the world, offering a Gospel message of peace and nonviolence. Kerouac faded away. Merton continued to blossom. It is hard to include his life in this history without taking into serious consideration his prophetic writings on peace and nonviolence in the 1960s to which his whole life had led him.

“Kerouac and Merton were above all writers with serious religious interests,” Fisher concludes. He continues:

Although they played for much greater stakes than the championship of Catholic romanticism, there is an unconscious complementarity about their work which illustrates like nothing else the ironic character of Catholic literary culture in the final years of its special mystique . . . Merton possessed



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just enough of an air of puckish irreverence, along with his inexorable spiritual gifts, to make him an ideal hero for a generation of Catholics anxious to show secular intellectuals that their church embodied more than "a mass of Irish pastors truckling to Italian cardinals."

Through his portraits, Fisher argues that for a certain handful, "the institutional church was of secondary importance as early as the 1930s." His character studies provide significant historical insights to the times, but overall, are too uneven to maintain his point. The book, well-researched and documented as it is, serves to remind us where we have come from, yet because the book fails to grasp the overarching evangelical influence of Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton — an influence that surpasses their times, the book strikes me as incomplete, though certainly interesting.

The signs of a countercultural or acultural movement in U. S. Catholicism today — including the work of the Berrigans, Pax Christi USA, the ever-present Catholic Worker houses of hospitality, and even the statements of the Bishops' Peace and Economic pastorals — find their roots in Day and Merton. Instead of causing the disintegration of the church and its culture, as Fisher argues, Day and Merton could be seen as the contractors who laid the groundwork for a growing social consciousness in the church — a true counterculture in American Catholicism that gave birth to a greater fidelity, albeit too few in number. Day and Merton started something. Quality, not quantity, was the impact of their lives among the faithful, and their voices are very present today.

## BERRIGAN: ARTIST & ACTIVIST

Review of

Ross Labrie

*THE WRITINGS OF DANIEL BERRIGAN*

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x, 273 pages / \$30.00 hardcover

Reviewed by **Thomas M. King, S. J.**

Daniel Berrigan the Jesuit and Thomas Merton the Trappist were important to each other. They were both priest-poets who found themselves in troubled times speaking in a troubled Church. They were both mavericks who did not seem to fit into the religious congregations they had joined as young men. Soon they each gained a wide following among the religionless, but again they were mavericks who continued to speak of the transcendent God. Merton was six

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