

THOMAS MERTON & EASTERN RELIGIONS: A Bibliography

by **Bonnie B. Thurston**

In the 1960s Merton was well known for his interest in Eastern religions. By 1968 he had studied Raja Yoga, Tibetan Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, Madhyamika philosophy, Shankara's *Avaita Vedanta*, *The Bhagavad Gita*, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam (especially the Sufis), Indonesian traditions, and Zen Buddhism. He had formed friendships with John C. H. Wu, Paul K. T. Shih, Masao Abe, D. T. Suzuki, the Dalai Lama, Chogyam Trungpa Rimpoche, Walpola Rahula, and Abdul Aziz.

Merton's interest in Oriental religions had begun twenty years earlier with a college reading of Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*. *The Seven Storey Mountain* recounts Merton's acquaintance with Wieger's French translations of Oriental texts and his friendship with the Hindu monk, Mahanambata Bramachari. Although his interest seems to have waned during his early years at Gethsemani, it reappeared in *The Sign of Jonas* (1953) as Merton remarks on a postulant who had received Zen training. Brother Patrick Hart reports that it was D. T. Suzuki who, in the early 1960s, stimulated Merton's interest in the subject.¹

After Merton's paraphrase of the Taoist *The Way of Chuang Tzu* and essays on Taoism in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, his largest body of writing on Eastern religions is on Zen. In addition to *Mystics and Zen Masters*, we have *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, *The Asian Journal, Encounter: Thomas Merton and D. T. Suzuki*, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, numerous scattered comments in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, *A Vow of Conversation*, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, and *The Road to Joy*, and the important material in

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart, & James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973): p. xxvii.



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Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work (first published under the title *Introductions East and West: The Foreign Prefaces of Thomas Merton*). The first volume of *The Merton Annual* (1988) has given us a new essay, "The Zen Insight of Shen Hui," and there may be further material in the restricted journals which are closed until 1993.

I have remarked elsewhere on the reasons for Merton's "turning East" to find a landscape to articulate his spiritual experience, to find a cultural alternative, to explore techniques for facilitating his spiritual journey, and to participate in monastic renewal.² It is interesting to me that the development of his thought carries one from the religious traditions of India along historical lines toward the development of those ideas in China and Japan. His work has influenced the current generation of scholars in the field of religious dialogue. Notable among them are John B. Cobb, Jr., William Johnston, S.J., Paul Knitter, Peter Munakata, Donald Swearer, Hans Waldenfels, and there are many others. William M. Thompson has done us a great service in focusing on Merton's contribution to a "transcultural consciousness."³

In order to assist students and scholars interested in this aspect of Merton's life and thought, I have prepared this bibliography of materials in English on Merton and the East. Omitted from the list are reviews of Merton's works (which can easily be found in the *Breit-Daggy Comprehensive Bibliography*, an invaluable tool for serious Merton scholarship), and foreign language essays. A bibliography of Merton's writings in Japan can be found in *The Merton Seasonal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1978). Included in this list, then, are what I consider to be the major books, scholarly articles, master's theses, and doctoral dissertations on Merton and Eastern religions. I ask pardon for my sins of omission and will be pleased to learn of anything I have inadvertently omitted.

Two notes on the contents of the list itself. First, it is interesting that there has been so little done on Merton and Chinese religions, especially in view of the two excellent essays in *Mystics and Zen Masters*. Second, it is shocking that there is so little examination of Merton's work on Islam since we have the Abdul Aziz letters and numerous tapes of talks Merton gave on Sufism. A beginning to filling this gap was made at the First General Meeting of *The International Thomas Merton Society* in May 1989 in the session on "Merton and Islam." One paper from that session appears in this issue and another in *The Merton Annual III*.

Finally, while I collected this material from many sources, I acknowledge my debt to the *Breit-Daggy Comprehensive Bibliography* against which I checked my final listing. Serious students should also consult the biographies by Jim Forest, Monica Furlong, Michael Mott, Basil Pennington, and Edward Rice.

2. See Bonnie B. Thurston, "Why Merton looked East," *Living Prayer* 21 (November-December 1988): no. 6, pp. 43-49.

3. William M. Thompson, "Merton's Contribution to a Transcultural Consciousness," in *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process*; ed. Michael W. Higgins & Donald Grayston (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983): pp. 147-169.

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