

# OF MERTON & THE EAST:

## A Letter to the *ITMS*

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Sometime before the Christmas holidays last year, I received notification that the local [Houston] chapter of *The International Thomas Merton Society* was disbanding. I had wanted to address an appeal to the local society, but perhaps it will serve just as well to address some thoughts to the general membership.

The emphasis locally seemed to be on Centering Prayer as Merton's contribution *par excellence* to spirituality. While the prayer techniques offer a return to a richer level of spirituality than had been generally available after Vatican II, they are not, as presented, tied to the teachings of the Church Fathers nor to other aspects of the Church's theology and spirituality. People are not receiving, in other words, the full picture as Merton saw it and their perception of this prayer technique may, in the end, be too shallow to sustain them.

Merton's interest in the Christian East, his obvious enrichment through the writings of the Eastern Fathers — Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, St. Ephraim, etc. — is not only ignored but there seems to be an embarrassed silence on the part of those who chose to lecture about Merton. Merton was undoubtedly influenced by the writings of the Greek Fathers and the Desert Fathers. The insights of the *Philokalia* should vastly enrich our understanding of the prayer life which gives rise to such expressions as Centering Prayer. Here is a wonderful opportunity to educate the Latin Rite laity on the treasures of Byzantine Catholic and Orthodox spirituality, to increase their understanding and appreciation of the fullness of our faith, and bring us closer to the ecumenism Merton would have encouraged.

Notwithstanding all this, only one speaker, that I recall, ever chose the topic: "Merton and Eastern Religions." For some very strange reason, however, the monk's talk was not on Eastern religions at all. When one of the questions after the talk was addressed to Eastern religions and Merton's interest therein, he skirted the issue. The word "Zen" was quite obviously taboo.

Are the speakers themselves so unfamiliar with the teachings of the "mystics" (Zen practitioners, Sufis, etc.) of other religions that they cannot grasp the common thread which Merton felt held a basis for fruitful dialogue between Christians and non-Christians? While they may shy away from approaching such topics in the presence of "uninformed laity," do they also ignore Merton's contributions in this area altogether?

As only one voice, still I am interested in knowing if anyone — lay or monastic — is continuing to develop this "common thread." Does dialogue exist? Who is carrying it out? Are there further writings on the subject? Where can they be obtained? Etc.

All of the above is not to suggest that theological inquiries into the realm of non-Christian thought should in any way supplant the rest of Merton's contributions, especially with regard to the life of prayer itself, but, on the other hand, to ignore the importance of this part of his work is to take several steps back in an age of enlightenment.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this statement of opinion, and I ask that God may continue to guide you in your endeavors.