

It takes someone who was not well adapted to using his hands to write a line like this: "The hermit remains there to prove, by his lack of practical utility . . . that monks themselves ought to have little significance in the world." Knowing that Merton was not into manual labor, knowing that he liked being in the middle of things, knowing that he said more about silence than he seemed to live it — all make this volume more valuable.

Merton knew his heart's desire. At the same time he was aware of his personal defects. He entered upon the monastic journey in an effort to allow God to find him. This collection of writings allows the reader to become aware of the various aspects of the monastic life which go into making the journey successful.

I am grateful to Brother Patrick Hart and Cistercian Publications for preserving this volume of Thomas Merton's writings. It is strongly recommended that people who are interested in the monastic life or who are interested in possessing some of Merton's better writing on the topic add this to their collections.

---

## PRELUDE OF MYSTICISM

Review of

Thomas M. King, S.J.

*MERTON: MYSTIC AT THE CENTER OF AMERICA*

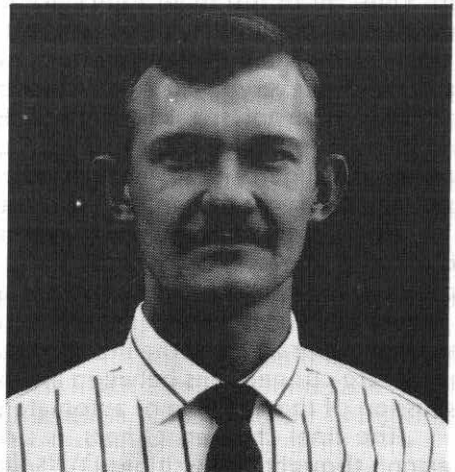
*The Way of Christian Mystics 14*

Collegetown, Minnesota: Liturgical Press/ Michael Glazer, 1992

x, 150 pages / \$12.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Kenneth M. Voiles**

Thomas Merton referred to the subject matter of his book, *The Ascent to Truth*, as "the prelude to mysticism." What he meant to indicate, I think, was that what he wanted to do in the book was organize and present, for himself and his readers, the basic and foundational theoretical information that one must have before setting out in any serious way on the road of contemplation and mysticism (or, at least, a specifically Catholic and Thomistic sort of mysticism and prayer). And, on specifically such a level, *The Ascent to Truth* is, more often than not, quite successful. Still, some years later, Merton would refer to it as his "emptiest book." His critique of his



**KENNETH M. VOILES**

---

□ **Kenneth M. Voiles** lives in Englewood, Colorado, and is a student at St. Thomas Seminary in Denver. He is a member of *The International Thomas Merton Society* and is serving on the Program Committee for the Third General Meeting of the *ITMS* in 1993. He was last represented in *The Merton Seasonal* by "Prades: A Photo Essay" (Summer 1992).

own work, in other words, did not center on what the book contained, but precisely on what it did *not* contain.

In many ways, Thomas King's *Merton: Mystic at the Center of America* can also be referred to as a "prelude of mysticism" — particularly the mysticism of Thomas Merton. My intention in making this comparison should not be misunderstood. That is, I do not mean to insinuate that it is an "empty" book. Nevertheless, readers familiar with King's other books, such as *Enchantments*, will I suspect find this book less intricate and full-bodied. But before one can critique a book on what it does not contain, one must consider what it does contain.

What King's book does contain is an impressively comprehensive, yet concise and readily readable, summation of Merton's general philosophical orientation toward the life of prayer and contemplation. Such a project has, of course, been undertaken before (for example, Bailey's *Merton on Mysticism* or Higgins's *Thomas Merton on Prayer*.) But King's treatment strikes me as the most accessible and patently "introductory" text yet to appear. Anyone just beginning to study Merton's views on the mystical life would, I suggest, find it vastly helpful to read King's book before diving into other more intricate and sometimes laborious considerations, or, for that matter, even before reading Merton's own writings. This, I would speculate, will prove to be the reason for the enduring value of King's book.

King divides his book into four sections: *Self*, *Contemplation*, *Freedom*, and *Others*. Though the themes of each section of necessity blend with and overlap one another, King does a fine job of constructing the four chapters so that they can stand and be understood as separate and fairly complete units in and of themselves. The first chapter, *Self*, deals, far more than the other chapters, with Merton's personal history and experience. Still, King tends to concentrate on Merton's early life to the neglect of his later years. Nevertheless, the chapter does contain a nice discussion of Zen (though a more academic and less personal or biographical consideration) as well as other issues central to Merton's thinking on the idea of the self (particularly, the polemic of the true and false selves, the nature of the person, questions surrounding the interrelationship of the ego, anonymity and personal identity, etc.).

In the second chapter, *Contemplation*, King does an admirable job of organizing and clearly presenting Merton's primary academic or philosophical conception of the life of contemplation, especially as that is presented in *The Ascent to Truth* and *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Thus, all of the main topics are present (e.g., natural and supernatural contemplation, metaphysical intuition, will and intellect, the problem of knowing, etc.) as well as considerations of the relationship between art and contemplation and contemplation and the "ordinary" (i.e., the realities of everyday living). Throughout the book it is King's stated intention to let Merton, more often than not, speak for himself. To this end, King quotes liberally from Merton's writings. Though this is perhaps the best, if not more difficult, way to approach the task which King has set for himself, readers already fairly familiar with Merton's writings will find parts of the book, and especially this second chapter, less stimulating than a reader new to Merton's work.

Chapter three, *Freedom*, may be the best in the book. Not only does King do an excellent job of using Merton's own words, but it is here that King's own insights and interpretations are most vivid and convincing. He stresses, and I think rightly, the sometimes overlooked centrality of the concept of freedom (personal and divine) in Merton's academic and existential understanding and practice of the life and way of prayer and contemplation. Also considered in this chapter are connections between art and freedom and mercy and freedom, along with a good discussion of the problem of automatonism and conformity.

The final chapter, *Others*, is structured around three "paradoxes" that King finds in Merton's thought and writing: (1) "Solitude is not opposed to Society"; (2) "Contemplation is

not opposed to Action"; and (3) "Monasticism is not opposed to the concerns of a Wider Society" (p. 107). More generally, the main theme that King addresses here, as the three paradoxes tend to indicate, is the question of the relationship of the mystic or contemplative or, even more specific, the hermit to the larger spheres of humanity in general and the Mystical Body of Christ in particular. King finds two major conclusions in Merton's thought. First, that anyone who is seriously involved in the contemplative life is, to some degree anyway, a solitary and even a hermit of sorts. The second conclusion is that Merton understood the relationship of the contemplative and the hermit to the world and the Body of Christ to be primarily a prophetic one — that is, one based in existential commitment and witness:

The true solitary is united with others because he or she is no longer entranced by the marginal concerns that dominate relationships today. The union is on a mystical level where one shares in the common human solitude apart from the diversions that alienate. But this is an explanation, and the solitary should not try to rationalize, defend or explain one's solitude, for the society of illusions will never understand those who do not conform. The Christian hermit will not be understood by other Christians, yet the Christian hermit is not really separated from the others: the hermit has a function within the Mystical Body of Christ. This function is the "paradoxical one of living outwardly separated" but spiritually united with the community . . . . The hermit is a witness of the transcendent character of the Christian bond. (p. 113)

Finally, I should say something about what, at least from my perspective, King's book does not contain. Sometimes, such lack is necessitated by the scope and format of the book. Other times this lack is more glaring and significant and less understandable, and it should be addressed. What is missing in the book can be seen most clearly, and somewhat unfortunately, in its very title: *Merton: Mystic at the Center of America*. For all that King's book is, it is really not about Merton the mystic nor about Merton at the heart of America.

First, the book is not about Merton the mystic, but rather it is about Merton the student and teacher of mysticism. Merton's actual experience of mystical prayer is left virtually unconsidered. Though King does spend some time, for example, on Merton's conversion experience in the Church of St. Frances in 1939 (pp. 81-82), certain other experiences that have come to be specially significant (the experiences at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville or before the Buddhas in Sri Lanka) are not even mentioned. Furthermore, some of Merton's most personal and most mystical writing is excluded from the outset. I am referring to Merton's poetry and prose poems. In his introduction, King flatly says: "I am aware of making little use of his poetry, for his poetry puzzles me and does not move me as does his prose" (p. x). As Merton did not write any specifically mystical-autobiographical treatises as John of the Cross or Teresa of Avila did, the person interested in understanding Merton the mystic must, instead, look to the writing that he did leave. And it seems safe to say that, next to his journals, Merton's poetical writings are perhaps the richest source for gaining insights into his ever-changing understanding of mystical prayer and to his actual experience of it.

Secondly, the book is not really about Merton at the center of America. The notion comes from a comment Merton made in an early journal (which King does not clearly identify though the quote comes from page 183 of *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*) about the Abbey of Gethsemani: "This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding the country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking in pieces and falling apart. It is places like this monastery" (quoted on p. v). As this very quotation seems to evidence, Merton's national concern is quickly enveloped by a more cosmic one. And indeed, such a transition (from the parochial to the universal) seems to be present throughout Merton's thought and development. In the final analysis, if one tries to place him, as a mystic or anything else, "at the center" of anything, it would have to be the world, if not the whole cosmos. Reading King's book, I had a

real sense that on some level he understood this and it may go far in explaining why, when he attempts to portray Merton as a mystic at the center of America, the results almost always seem forced and never really convincing. For example, at the end of chapter two, King says:

Contemplation is not a commodity for the chosen few, but the goal of all who try to find significance in spite of themselves in the Living God. It does not make sense to the world, for it does not accomplish the goals that the world has set for itself. But the contemplative and the poet can remind the world of the ultimate that is simply there: This is what our nation needs to recognize. For "without contemplation, without the intimate, silent, secret pursuit of truth through love," the American nation will become inhuman. (p. 75)

The reader is left to wonder about why America is singled out here. One is left to question whether or not America can be singled out in this regard. Even more so, one is left to wonder if Merton would have considered the tendencies and dangers outlined in this quotation as strictly or even predominantly American.

In fact, and in short, I would suggest that the task of trying to portray Merton as a mystic at the center of America is bound to be a deeply difficult and permanently fragile, if not an impossible, one. I say this because I would further suggest that if Merton was anything "at the center of America," then he was a stranger there. Throughout my reading of King's book one passage from Merton's writings came to my mind repeatedly. It is a passage from his wonderful essay, *Day of a Stranger*. It is a passage, a contrived "interview," that I believe is not only illuminating in regard to Merton the mystic and contemplative, but also in reference to Merton as a monk and priest who deliberately chose to be a "stranger" — a man without a country, if you will. The passage goes like this:

— Why live in the woods?

— Well, you have to live somewhere.

— Do you get lonely?

— Yes, sometimes.

— Are you mad at people?

— No.

— Are you mad at the monastery?

— No.

— What do you think about the future of monasticism?

— Nothing. I don't think about it.

— Is it true that your bad back is due to Yoga?

— No.

— Is it true that you are practicing Zen in secret?

— Pardon me, I don't speak English.