

What I Wear is Pants

Review of
 Suzanne Zuercher OSB
Merton: An Enneagram Profile
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Reviewed by **Rose Annette Liddell, SL**

This is not a hermitage-it is a house . . .
 What I wear is pants. What I do is live.
 How I pray is breathe.
A Thomas Merton Reader, p. 433.

In this intriguing book, Suzanne Zuercher (rhymes with “searcher”) presumes an interest of the reader in both the life of Thomas Merton and a knowledge of the enneagram. The author is well versed in both areas having written several books on the enneagram and being a well-read student of Merton.

Merton’s life is not described in a factual historical style, rather it is examined from the standpoint of personality development. This study looks at this personality from the perspective of a nine-type description of personality or nine kinds of human energy. Each life stance or space has its own perception or compulsions, “a path Thomas Merton walked from the standpoint of one of these nine incarnations of human experience.” (p. 14) As far as we can tell, Merton was unfamiliar with the enneagram so Zuercher has taken the liberty to determine Merton’s number type posthumously, though she acknowledges that this is not without some danger. (p. 4) (Usually only the individual involved has the right to determine his or her personal enneagram stance.) Zuercher sees Merton as a four - the compulsions of which are ego-romantic, ego-melancholic and over-dramatic. The positive side of fours include sensitivity, active involvement with reality, and a creative approach to life.

The book is divided into five parts with short chapter headings under each part which makes for easy reading. Part I, entitled *The Enneagram, the Spiritual Journey, and Thomas Merton*, shows how the type four developed out of his childhood experiences and how his unique personality exemplifies this type.

Part II, *Instinct, Compulsion and Gift*, in seven chapters investigates Merton’s struggles as a young monastic to grow into a contemplative, and also looks at some of the obstacles he faced in light of characteristics of a type four. Part III, the *Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton*, examines in six chapters his spirituality and its development. The concept of home takes on special meaning. Zuercher explores his early restlessness as he seeks stricter forms of religious life, such as Camaldolese or the hermit life, until his restlessness finally grew into a recognition that Gethsemani was indeed his

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true home (as he wrote from Asia). She observes that he had a rhythm of wanting more solitude and then would swing back to wanting to be in touch with people. "Thomas Merton's gift was not to be a defender of the faith but a companion to all who search." (p. 106)

In the chapter "Deaths and Births" Zuercher discusses Merton's inconsistencies, the fluctuations of thought, feeling and behavior usual to the type four personality. She locates an explanation in the four-view of life as a pattern of birth and death so that this type is always in the process of beginnings and endings.

Part IV, entitled *Relationship Brings Meaning: the People in Merton's Life*, is the most interesting part of the book because it shows how Merton felt about people and how they related to him. As those who have read Merton know, he had an uneven relationship with his monastic community. Zuercher suggests why the four type would relate as he did and how he grew to view the monastery as a "school of liberty." She states that "genuineness, even if not always wholeness, seemed everyone's experience of Merton." (p. 148)

The author then examines his relations with friends and colleagues to indicate how warm and caring a friend he could be. Chapter eighteen, entitled "The Feminine," looks at Merton's relations with women, commencing with the much maligned Ruth Merton. Zuercher also looks at his friendship with the nurse Margie in much detail and depth. (I found this chapter to be one of the most engrossing and best developed.)

Part V, *Merton's Spiritual Message*, sums up the book in three chapters: "The True Self," "The Contemplative Life" and "Prayer." There is some redundancy in these chapters. I found the chapter on contemplative life unclear as to whether what was meant was a specific call to the monastic contemplative vocation or the general call to be a contemplative. The chapter on prayer perceptively discussed Merton's liturgical prayer life. Also mentioned is Brother Patrick Hart's observation of Merton's contemplative use of photography. Both insights are refreshingly creative.

There was one instance in which I would take issue with the author. She states: "Thomas Merton is undoubtedly a great master of spirituality and prayer. He wrote about both extensively and lived them intensely - as he came to see, *too intensely*." (P. 181) Why should one question the living of spirituality and prayer too intensely unless one has qualified what is meant? It seems too broad and critical a question not to develop the thought further.

For Merton devotees and for type fours this book will be of interest. Anyone who is a four will see this type spelled out in great detail. To me, sections felt redundant, especially Part III where the descriptions of the interior life were over-analyzed. In her conclusion, Zuercher mentions the forth-coming journal publications (which are appearing this year, 1996), but says this book could not wait. In some ways, the book would have been richer if she had waited. It remains, however, an interesting addition to the growing volume of Merton studies, both in its depiction of Merton's personality and its application of the enneagram to a well-known figure.