

Merton for a New Generation

Review of

Thomas Merton (Spiritual Leaders and Thinkers Series)

By Samuel Willard Crompton

Langhorne, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004

120 pages / \$22.95 hardbound

Reviewed by **Kristen Wisniewski**

This volume is a part of a series of six books about people who have had a significant impact on the practice of religion. I was glad to see that the series includes clergy as well as laity and covers diverse faiths. The other books in the series are on Gandhi, Mary Baker Eddy, Martin Luther, the Dalai Lama and Aimée Semple McPherson (five more are scheduled for publication in 2005). The books are sold together as a collection (as well as separately) and carry a significant price tag. I would think this would be appropriate for a library or a religious education program to own, but probably not an average individual.

Although this book is geared toward the junior high / high school age group, I think it would be a good introduction for anyone who is unfamiliar with Thomas Merton. The book is divided into several chapters, each covering a significant portion of his life. It starts with a general overview of who he was, and then goes back to the beginnings of his life in France. It would be difficult to use just pieces of this book to study from, since it is written chronologically and needs to be read in its entirety to get the whole story. This is a well-written book and I believe it presents Merton in a fair and balanced fashion. He wasn't always a saint, and he wasn't always a sinner. This book gives the reader the fact that he was both, as a man striving to live for God in the best way he knew how.

Great features about the book include direct quotations from Merton's writings, as well as thoughts from people who knew him. *The Seven Storey Mountain* is quoted heavily, as one would expect in a biography of Merton. A surprise chapter was on the history of the Cistercian order, a good background piece for those not familiar with monks or religious communities. The book also features photographs of Merton at different points in his life. Also incorporated are several appendices which include: Thomas Merton's prayer ("My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going . . ."), a list of his published works, an excerpt from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, an excerpt from *Something of a Rebel* (by William Shannon), an excerpt from *No Man Is an Island*, a chronology & timeline not only of Merton's life, but also of significant events during his lifetime, a glossary, a bibliography, future reading suggestions and an index.

Other pieces of the book that I found interesting and helpful were little insets with historical information in them. They offer brief glimpses into other people and concepts that are referenced in the pages of the book as they are connected to Merton, including the Dalai Lama, Bob Dylan, Zen Buddhism, John F. Kennedy, as well as others. It was very useful to have a little background

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information to supplement the main focus of the book. I think this will be helpful for the group that this book is geared to, since none of them would have been alive when JFK was president, or Bob Dylan was writing his protest songs. This is no *Seven Storey Mountain*, nor does it claim to be – it's just a well-written introduction to get the next generation interested in a great spiritual leader and thinker.