

The Nouwen File and the Merton Book

Review of

Encounters with Merton: Spiritual Reflections

Reviewed by Henri Nouwen

New York: Crossroad, 2004.

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Reviewed by **Patricia A. Burton**

Last October I had the pleasure of examining a small file of material on Thomas Merton in Henri Nouwen's papers at the Nouwen Centre, which is a part of the John N. Kelly Library at St. Michael's, University of Toronto. It is another of the little hoards of mimeographs and other ephemera which are scattered about in libraries, following Merton's own strategy of ensuring the survival of his writing by spreading it around as much as possible, and distributing uncensored material in mimeograph form. Nouwen had evidently made use of the material, adding typed or handwritten notations in both Dutch and English.

Nouwen had been teaching at Notre Dame in 1967, and on a visit to Gethsemani in May of that year he tagged along with two students who made a visit to Merton. He wrote a short account of the visit in his foreword to James Finley's book *Merton's Palace of Nowhere (MPN)*, where he observed that "Merton proved to be a very down-to-earth, healthy human being who was not going to perform to satisfy our curiosity" (7). They sat at the edge of Monk's Pond and drank beer. Nouwen learned that one should never mistake the guru for the message, a lesson which was probably useful to him when he in turn suffered the enormous pressures which come with the office of guru. (As a sidenote – Merton mis-heard Nouwen's name and called him "Father Nau," the spelling given in the hardcover edition of his journal; in the paperback version it is corrected: see *Learning to Love* 232). After the visit, Nouwen's name was put on Merton's mailing list, and he subsequently received quite a few mimeographs, including drafts of various articles Merton had prepared for publication in magazines, and some of the "Circular Letters" which Merton dispatched to friends in an effort to keep up with his correspondence. Nouwen had also clipped some items out of newspapers, and had received material about Merton's death from Gethsemani.

In 1970, a book on Merton by Nouwen was published in Dutch as *Bidden om het Leven*. Interested in the relationship between the files and Nouwen's book, I examined my own copy of the English translation, *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic (TMCC)* (Harper & Row, 1981; reprinted by Tri-

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umph Books, 1991), against a copy of the first printing in English, *Pray to Live* (Notre Dame: Fides, 1972). These are essentially the same book: the typeset and pagination of the main text in these editions are identical; John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, who wrote the foreword of the 1972 edition, updated it slightly in 1981 (noting the difference in the time since Merton's death); in the 1981 version, accompanying material on publication rights had been added; all of these editions have a Merton bibliography at the end.

Nouwen's original text, intended to introduce Merton to a Dutch audience largely unfamiliar with him, was divided into two parts, almost equal in length, labelled "For Instruction" and "For Meditation." The first was his own essay about Merton; in the second he uses selections from Merton's books to illustrate his text and familiarize the reader with Merton's own writings. He chose five important aspects of Merton's life and work, and all these years later we can still see he was an astute observer. The chapter headings are instructive: "From Sarcasm to Contemplation" (from the ironic young man of *The Secular Journal* to the seeker in *The Sign of Jonas*); "The Way to Silence" (from the young seeker in *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *Jonas*, who found friends, mentors and events which guided his way); "Conquering Solitude" (from the ironic young man to one who seeks a deeper solitude, even beyond his monastery); "Unmasking the Illusion" (from solitude to the discovery that the monk cannot get away from 'the world' and its problems, with passages from various books); and "Discovery of the East" (from the spiritual formation of a Christian monk to the discovery of Eastern wisdom, as indicated in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*). Each section of the first part is balanced by its counterpart in the second where Nouwen has selected texts to meditate upon, often closely following the timeline of Merton's life.

The latest version of the book, now entitled *Encounters with Merton: Spiritual Reflections* (*EM*), has been edited and reorganized, not with the purpose of updating the Nouwen material (although some of it has been edited), but of re-arranging the passages from Merton's books that had occupied nearly half of the original book.

In his introduction, Nouwen mentions people who helped with the production of the book in English, particularly John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO, for his "willingness to annotate the text and to write the Preface" (*TMCC* 4; *EM* 20). These annotations involved the source notes scattered throughout Nouwen's text. Nouwen had in some cases used original mimeographs in his file as sources, and where possible, Father John Eudes had updated the citations, to reflect what was in print in 1972. Thus "The Hot Summer of 67" is correctly sourced in *Faith and Violence*, "A Christian Looks at Zen" in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, "Is the World a Problem?" in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, etc. However, throughout all the subsequent editions, including this one, the annotations have remained the same since 1972, although some are no longer current with the state of Merton publication.

With some added research, four items could have been situated in books which have come into print after 1972:

1. "Circular Letter, Midsummer 1968": this is somewhat problematic because it refers to a paragraph from a mimeographed circular letter that Nouwen quoted: the editor of the volume of letters in which it appears (*The Road to Joy* 117) omitted the last three sentences, which Nouwen quotes (obviously from the original mimeograph) (*TMCC* 56-57; *EM* 92-93).

2. "Marxist Theory and Monastic *Theoria*" (1968): Merton delivered this talk a few hours before his death. (It has a 5x8 card in the Nouwen file, but the article itself has disappeared.) The essay in

mimeograph, noted somewhat inaccurately by Nouwen, had the title above. It was published as “Marxism and Monastic Perspectives” in *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (1973) (326-43), so it just missed out on the 1972 annotations. Nouwen’s quotation (TMCC 51-52; EM 85-86) needs to be updated.

3. Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1963): this piece has been of great interest to Merton’s readers, because it is the only place he commented at length, long after its creation, on his enduring best-seller. It is quoted twice by Nouwen (TMCC 67, 68; EM 107, 108). It appears in a collection of Merton prefaces, *‘Honorable Reader’: Reflections on My Work* (1991), first published as *Introductions East and West* (1981).

4. Letter, 21 August 1967 – “Message of Contemplatives to the Modern World”: Nouwen could have got this citation in many places, but the use of the date in the title indicates that he probably got a copy as a mimeograph. It was published in various ways in its time, and has been reproduced twice more in Merton books published after the 1972 update of Nouwen’s notes: *The Hidden Ground of Love* 158; *The Monastic Journey* 173.

If Nouwen was indeed trying to introduce readers to Merton, the book would be more valuable to new readers if the citations were updated to suggest more books in which to seek Merton’s writing. Nouwen was not writing a scholarly treatise, but there are copyright conventions to be observed, especially if a book is revised for a new publication. The editors tinkered with Nouwen’s prose, particularly in the chapter “Unmasking the Illusion,” removing some quoted material and rewriting some parts; the documentation should have been attended to as well.

There is an additional twist to the story of the notations. The pagination of the notes in the original book indicates that Nouwen was not using the hardcover editions of three of Merton’s books, but was quoting from the mass-market paperback versions. The books are *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*, *Seeds of Destruction*, and *The Sign of Jonas*. When mainstream American publishers realized that Merton’s popularity was going to last, they discontinued the sale of the mass-market paperbacks and instead published soft-cover trade editions using the same typeset as the original hardcover books. This feature is very useful to scholars. As time has passed, it is the mass-market paperbacks which have become scarce, and the trade editions ubiquitous. An additional oddity is that in the first chapter, “From Sarcasm to Contemplation,” the editors of EM have updated the pagination of the Merton quotations from *The Secular Journal* in the “For Meditation” section (33-37) to be in line with the hardcover and trade paperback editions, but left the page references in the body of Nouwen’s essay (26-33) uncorrected.

Sprinkled throughout the book are errors, some of which have persevered from the original text onwards. In his “Short Biography,” Nouwen mistakenly called Merton’s friend Bramachari “a Buddhist monk” (EM 22), although later he correctly refers to him as a Hindu (EM 51). Through every edition, Merton’s date of entry into Gethsemani is given as “December 10, 1942” instead of 1941 (EM 23). A transcription error of the new edition prints a chapter heading from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* as “Earth’s Dream” instead of “Barth’s Dream” (66).

A great deal more has been done besides moving Nouwen’s selections from Merton from a separate Part II to the end of each chapter. The Merton bibliography is gone, and the space has been employed in promoting other Nouwen books, particularly those being published in a new series of reprints from Crossroad. Drastic cuts in the Merton material have been made. Of the 133 passages in the second part of the original book, 68 have been cut entirely, and 14 others edited down to make

them shorter. Only 19 of the original selections are reproduced as Nouwen quoted them. In the original book, Nouwen sometimes used a Merton text in the body of his essay, and then repeated it in the “For Meditation” section, presumably to give it context in Merton’s writing. With almost all of the passages of this type, the editors have cut the corresponding text from the meditation material, sometimes expanding the quotation by a sentence or two from the supplementary material: 26 moves of this type were made. However, the system of keeping the passage in the Nouwen essay and dropping it in the meditations was not observed on six occasions, particularly with two substantial texts duplicated in the last chapter. The editors have also removed Nouwen’s contextual titles within the meditations, especially in the case of *The Sign of Jonas*. In the original version Nouwen listed the titles of each part of Merton’s book, and printed the date at the top of each passage, preserving the timeline and situating the quotations in Merton’s life. The editors offer us instead a drastically reduced selection of meditations, with titles of their own choosing: “On the noise of the day”; “On shutting up”; “On the futility of words”; etc. (EM 76-77). They have similarly interpolated subject headings into Nouwen’s essay. These changes are directive and prescriptive: the editors seem to want to be sure we know what to think or “meditate” upon as we read. Replacing a text drastically reduced in substance, a decorative feature is added by the editors, involving pages sprinkled throughout the book, offering unattributed, matching aphorisms from Nouwen and from Merton in large cursive script.

These actions by the editors have changed the original focus and intent of the book. Nouwen wanted to introduce Merton to new readers, and his book is as useful for that purpose as it ever was; his analysis is sharp, pulling together many of the elements of the multi-sided Merton, in Merton’s words as well as his own. It was, and still is, a perfectly valid format. There are now many books with selections from Merton’s writing, in many languages: Nouwen’s was the first, and it still reads well, with the caveats provided by John Eudes in his Foreword.

The overall impression is that the editors took the trouble of researching Nouwen but not Merton, and did not seek to make up this lack by consulting someone in the flourishing academy of Merton studies, centered at the repository of Merton’s papers at Bellarmine University at Louisville. They have also not respected Nouwen’s original intent for the book. We are not invited to learn about Merton’s struggles through his own writing (and thus see his spiritual struggles in the light of our own). Difficult passages, like a series of excerpts from *My Argument with the Gestapo*, have been removed. Instead, we are offered a few shortened quotes, pre-digested by the editors. The result frustrates Nouwen’s plan, without good reason.

The editing also cuts off another valid line of inquiry: what do the choices from Merton’s books reveal about Nouwen and his own struggles? Clearly the editors are not interested in this interplay, but wish only to present the book with a maximum of Nouwen and not much Merton. Readers who respect both authors would be better satisfied in picking up a used copy of the original book and enjoying Nouwen’s lively treatment of the man whom Nouwen met only once, but who became such a friend that his death felt as if it were “the death of one of my closest friends” (PN 3).