

Beneath the Varnished Surface

Review of

Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology

by Gordon Oyer

Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2021

xix + 275 pages / \$30.00 paper

Reviewed by **Thomas T. Spencer**

The prolific nature of Thomas Merton's writings is even more revealing when considering his correspondence. In addition to the hundreds of books, essays and reviews he authored in his lifetime, he also wrote over 12,000 letters to more than 2,100 correspondents (see ix). These letters attest to Merton's far-reaching influence and the impact he had on so many people, some well-known and others not. Daniel Berrigan summed up best why so many sought his guidance and wisdom: "He was always digging beneath the varnished surface, telling the truth about forces really at work in church and state" (110).

Gordon Oyer is a familiar name to many Merton scholars and readers. The author of several articles and essays on Merton, he is best known for his award-winning work *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (2014). Drawing upon his previous research on Merton's involvement with peace and protest and modeling his study after William Apel's *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (2006), he has compiled and analyzed Merton's letters to select correspondents dealing with the vital issues of peace, race and ecology. Readers may recognize some of the correspondence to and from individuals such as Dorothy Day or Daniel Berrigan, that has been included in other publications, but Oyer also draws from unpublished letters from the Merton archives at Bellarmine University and other collections and includes correspondents who are not as familiar or well-known. The result is a more complete and holistic look at Merton's thinking on these important subjects.

Oyer sees "personhood" as vital to understanding Merton's approach to his correspondence. In his perceptive introduction, he elaborates on what others have also discerned that Merton's letter-writing was an extension of his monastic vision, with the person serving as a portal to engage others (see 4). There was a distinct purpose as to why Merton corresponded with whom he did on these important issues. He saw these individuals as representing, as the title of book affirms, the hope for significant social transformation.

The first part of *Signs of Hope* will likely be the most familiar to readers as Oyer discusses Merton's correspondence with Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Jim Forest and Jim Douglass on issues of peace and non-violent protest. Other authors have studied different aspects of Merton's

Thomas T. Spencer is a retired teacher in the South Bend Community School Corporation, and Adjunct Professor of History at Indiana University, South Bend and Holy Cross College, Notre Dame, IN. He has contributed eleven previous articles to *The Merton Seasonal* on various aspects of Thomas Merton's life and work, most recently "They Were Mine and I Theirs": The Shared Vision of Humanity of Thomas Merton and Richard Wright" (Spring 2022).

relationships with these individuals, but by pulling together their collective correspondence Oyer is able to provide a more developed context and better understanding of Merton's involvement in the peace movement. His correspondence with these four was extensive and collectively it reveals how careful and measured he was in his responses, particularly when it concerned the nature of their activism, or when he disagreed them on issues, as he did with Dorothy Day on the nature of pacifism, or the burning of draft cards. The letters also illuminate how Merton frequently derived as much support and inspiration from their thoughts and counsel as they did from his. Assessing Douglass' letters to Merton, Oyer notes: "The significance of these letters for Merton's pilgrimage with non-violent peace activism cannot be overstated" (58). Douglass provided Merton much personal and first-hand information about people and events with the peace movement and in doing so encouraged Merton to write more about non-violent protest.

Oyer's chapter on the late Jim Forest is especially rewarding. Forest first met Merton while on retreat at Gethsemani in 1962, and Merton became a good friend and mentor. Forest, who was instrumental in the founding of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, would later write a book on Merton's peace activism, as well as numerous articles and reminiscences about their close relationship. Their candid letters helped deepen their friendship and reveal much about the two men, their personalities and their mutual concerns for peace and social justice.

Not everyone Merton corresponded with in *The Signs of Hope* is as well-known as Dorothy Day or Daniel Berrigan, but the letters were no less impactful. This is the case with Merton's dialogue on race that he conducted with Marlon Green, Father August Thompson, Robert Williams and Vincent Harding. This correspondence shows Merton as a white person struggling with his own role and responsibility in the racial discourse and again weighing his words carefully when it came to advice and counsel. Prior to attending a Catholic Interracial Council discussion about joining Jewish and Protestant clergy in civil rights protest, Fr. August Thompson asked him for "comments, suggestions, and any reflections to pass along on Merton's behalf." Merton deferred the request but did provide some insightful comments on the Church and race. Perceptive of Thompson's position as a Catholic priest involved in public protest Merton advised, you are in a "very special and difficult position" and when you can, be sure to make clear "just where you stand." He added, "do nothing needlessly to get your bishop on your neck" (145-46).

Merton's collaboration with African American singer Robert Williams highlights the complexity and challenges of engaging others solely through correspondence, especially when it involves business arrangements. Williams was impressed by Merton's empathy and understanding of racial issues and initiated what would become several years of correspondence between the two. Merton eventually collaborated with Williams and wrote a series of 8 poems that the composer put into a composition known as "Freedom Songs," a project designed to foster greater Black inclusion and awareness. Legal issues over literary rights and Williams' disillusionment over the direction of the project diminished the impact of what both had hoped to accomplish with the songs and highlighted their differing perceptions and misunderstandings on the issue, all of which proved difficult to fully resolve through letters alone. It strained their relationship as was evident in one letter Merton wrote to Williams, noting "if it gives you personal satisfaction to kick me in the teeth about all this, then

go ahead, it's been done before" (176).

The final section of *Signs of Hope* is slightly different in scope and deals with letters Merton sent to individuals for the purpose of sharing ideas of mutual interest, rather than establishing an ongoing or personal relationship. They deal with what Oyer describes as the key realms of the modern human experience – language and communication, modern technology and an “anthropology, a human self-perception, that alienates us from the natural world on which we depend” (203). Correspondents include a diverse group of recipients including Rachel Carson, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Laurence van der Post, Ernesto Cardenal and Walter Weisskopf. These letters further demonstrate how much impact others had on Merton as he had on them. Oyer notes that his exchanges with Barbara Marx Hubbard coupled with his personal reading and his own anthropological studies seemed to nudge Merton “to more clearly recognize our partnership within an ‘ecological community’” (238).

Signs of Hope is a well-written and insightful contribution that furthers our understanding of Merton, his writings and his interest in engaging others on the critical issues of his time. Readers will appreciate the biographical sketches Oyer provides of the correspondents that help explain Merton's motivations in conducting such correspondence and create a larger context with which to view the letters. The bibliography and extensive sources cited in the footnotes attest to the comprehensive nature of his research. Aside from a very trivial issue – a mislabeled portrait on page 134 that identifies John Howard Griffin's photo of Fr. August Thompson as Fr. August Thomas – there is nothing to fault in this fine work. Merton scholars and devotees, as well as those unfamiliar with Merton, will find *Signs of Hope* engaging and thought-provoking. As always, reading these letters and Oyer's perceptive analysis confirms once again how Merton's writings on such vital issues are as relevant today as they were when written over fifty years ago.