

# Book Reviews: Merton, America, Francis of Assisi

**THE ASIAN JOURNAL OF THOMAS MERTON.** Edited from his original notebooks by Naomi Burton, Br. Patrick Hart and James Laughlin. Consulting Editor: Amiya Chakravarty. New York: New Directions: 445 p., 1973, \$12.50. Reviewed by Sr. Donald Corcoran, O.S.B.

This fine book is the journal of Thomas Merton's trip to the East in the fall of 1968. Merton died on December 10, 1968, while on the journey, at a meeting of Christian monks concerned with dialogue with non-Christian contemplatives. A great debt is owed to the editors—Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart, James McLaughlin and Amiya Chakravarty—who laboriously compiled this published version from three separate notebooks which Merton kept on the journey.

The format of the *Asian Journal* closely resembles Merton's earlier journals such as *Sign of Jonas* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. In these works, more than in most of his writing, there is a personal element—a look at Merton the man—which makes them eminently readable. The great vitality of Merton—his great insight, faith and humor—comes through with a freshness that could only be tempered in more expository prose. The journal entries (each usually a paragraph or two) vary from Merton's accounts of people or places to profound reflections on the nature of contemplation, Buddhist "emptiness," etc.

The book is a great testimony to what Amiya Chakravarty emphasizes in his introduction: Merton's "openness to man's spiritual horizons . . . (coming) from a rootedness of faith." Merton overflows with the spirit of Christ, embracing and blessing what is sincere and of value in every man's spiritual quest. Merton as a monk recognizes the true Eastern contemplative as "brother." Merton's accounts of meeting with these kindred souls in the East is, I find, the best part of the book. Merton describes his meeting with a Tibetan rimpoché (guru), for example: "The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow on the edge of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it—and that it was a grace for us to meet one another . . . He burst out and called me a rangjung Sangay (which apparently means a 'natural Buddha') . . ." (p. 143)

The journal entries provide a rich diversity of reading: the humor of simple details (a swami who even has saffron kleenex), poetry, deep reflection. "The contemplative life must provide an area, a space of liberty, of silence, in which possibilities are allowed to surface and new choices—beyond routine choices—become manifest. It should create a new experience of time, not as stopgap, stillness, but as 'temps vierge'—not a blank to be filled or an untouched space to be conquered and violated, but a space which can enjoy its own potentialities and hopes—and its own presence to itself. One's own time. But not dominated by one's own ego and its demands. Hence open to others—compassionate time . . ." (p. 117)

Merton's mind continually leaps to correspondences between Buddhism and Christianity: bodhicitta and grace, the "ax of true doctrine" which a rimpoché speaks of and John the Baptist's "laying the ax to the root," mandala symbolism in Romanesque art and Tibetan painting, etc. Throughout the *Asian Journal* one sees Merton's insight growing both from extensive reading and spontaneous association from his own spiritual experience. Thus early in the journal, Merton comments after reading a few pages of Tucci's *The Theory and Practice of the Mandala*: ". . . all this mandala business is, for me, at least useless . . . Why complicate what is simple?" Merton rejects a purely intellectual understanding of the mandala (an archetypal symbol of spiritual integration). Later in the journal it is obvious that his understanding has matured through a recognition of the mandala as part of his own experience:

"A Christ mandala, in St. Paul's 'to understand the length and the breadth, the height and the depths.'" Merton realized from his own experience that Christ is precisely the all-inclusive Center. Merton also comments: "Everything I think or do enters into the construction of a mandala." Holiness is wholeness. A deep spirituality necessarily attempts to integrate all of reality. Identification with the Center means comprehensiveness. The Center is everywhere, the circumference is nowhere.

Above all the journal indicates the immense energy Merton invested in a lifelong spiritual search. There is no question that Merton died intending to remain a Christian and a monk of Gethsemani—granted that might mean a peculiar type of hermit life. His fidelity sprang from the same Source as his ongoing search.

**AMERICANS AGAINST MAN.** By Rory McCormick. New York: Corpus Books, 1970. 134 pp., \$6.95, pb., \$3.95. Reviewed by Michael Kirwan.

In fewer than one hundred and fifty pages, Rory McCormick touches on virtually every important issue that has beset the United States in the last twenty years, issues which have been felt by Americans as well as our afflicted brothers around the world. To list a few: the growth of capitalism and decline of re-

our beliefs and values, is imperative for the safety of mankind everywhere. Mankind will have no peace or safety until the colossus is cut down to human size. This will happen only when Americans abandon their faith in technology and military violence for a belief in the pre-eminence of human fellowship. This book is must reading for anyone interested in our relationships among ourselves and our fellow human beings.

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**BROTHER FRANCIS: An Anthology of Writings by and about St. Francis of Assisi.** Edited by Lawrence Cunningham. New York: Harper and Row, 1972. 201 p., \$5.95.

**LIVING OUR FUTURE: Francis of Assisi and the Church Tomorrow.** By Mario von Galli, S.J. Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1972. 239 p., \$6.95. Reviewed by Pat Jordan.

These two books, as the titles imply, show the legacy and importance of Francis to the life of the Church. The first is a popular anthology of writings by and about the poor little man of Assisi. While not exhaustive, this volume is a suitable introduction to both the recorded words, letters, and prayers of the Saint, and to the immense literature of scholars over the centuries who have been enchanted with him.

Cunningham relies heavily on the *Fioretti*, or *Little Flowers of St. Francis*, to express the nature of Francis' relation to poverty, prayer, solitude and suffering. The *Fioretti* has been well-worn in such exercises. But it is unfortunate that the present editor has again chosen it to the more historical and primary biographies of Celano and Bonaventure.

The recorded prayers of the Saint will undoubtedly strike some as stilted. They are the formal prayer of a medieval man. We might expect little of note in the written prayers of Francis, who took the Gospels very literally and fully, and whose deepest prayers took place behind the closed doors of solitude. Cunningham quotes Johannes Jorgensen's account of Francis reprimanding Br. Leo for spying on him while he prayed.

The second book, Fr. von Galli's *Living Our Future*, has the burden of relating Francis to the contemporary world (via the Second Vatican Council) and to the future. This should not be a burden, as Fritz Eichenberg's woodcuts and engravings have testified in these pages for years. But at times von Galli does make a burden of it, and that is to our loss. He has a style peculiar to some preachers (he is a renowned one): that is, he often draws the conclusions before the testimony has been fully given; and on the other hand, he occasionally drums an issue into the ground.

But there are surprises in this uneven volume. After a confusing discussion of revolution (which demonstrates a superficial understanding of anarchism and utopian socialism), the author has the good fortune to quote Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan poet, priest, revolutionary, and Trappist monk. Says Cardenal (who recently visited us here on First St., and who is the author of *Psalms of Struggle and Liberation*): "[The] society of the future already exists today, like a seed waiting to bud. Not tied to political boundaries, it is composed of individuals and small groups scattered around the world. Insofar as I am a priest, a pacifist, a Christian anarchist, and a Gandhian in politics, I feel that I am a solid member of this society as well." (p. 168) Such insights are rare in many books, and enhance this one. Also of importance is the picture of Francis as a man whose life was moved by the fulcrum of the Scriptures.

At a time when the Church is in need of a return to poverty, when wars rage in the Holy Land, it is wonderful to return to St. Francis. Hopefully these two books will lead us to the more unforgettable biographies by Sabatier, Chesterton, and Jorgensen; and to a renewal of the Franciscan zeal that cleansed a previous era.

## W. H. AUDEN, 1907-1973

### BARBED WIRE

Across the square,  
Between the burnt-out Law Courts and Police Headquarters,  
Past the Cathedral far too damaged to repair,  
Around the Grand Hotel patched up to hold reporters,  
Near huts of some Emergency Committee,  
The barbed wire runs through the abolished City.

Across the plains,  
Between two hills, two villages, two trees, two friends,  
The barbed wire runs which neither argues nor explains  
But where it likes a place, a path, a railroad ends,  
The humour, the cuisine, the rites, the taste,  
The pattern of the City, are erased.

Across our sleep  
The barbed wire also runs: It trips us so we fall  
And white ships sail without us though the others weep,  
It makes our sorry fig-leaf at the Sneezer's Ball,  
It ties the smiler to the double bed,  
It keeps on growing from the witch's head.

Behind the wire  
Which is behind the mirror, our Image is the same  
Awake or dreaming: It has no image to admire,  
No age, no sex, no memory, no creed, no name,  
It can be counted, multiplied, employed  
In any place, at any time destroyed.

Is it our friend?  
No: that is our hope; that we weep and It does not grieve,  
That for It the wire and the ruins are not the end:  
This is the flesh we are but never would believe,  
The flesh we die but it is death to pity;  
This is Adam waiting for His City.

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ligion; the use of wealth to gain more wealth rather than for the good of the commonweal; the greedy prostitution of natural resources; rampant materialism regardless of the mental, emotional and physical cost; the dissolution of universities from centers of conscience and scholarship to mere marketplaces for the highest bidder of government or industrial research; counter-revolutionary involvement in the attempts of nations to rid themselves of hunger, disease and political oppression; the cancerous growth of a militaristic society, resulting in citizens' acceptance of a monstrous Pentagon, poor gun control, neo-vigilante groups, absurd security and spy checks in every facet of our society.

Mr. McCormick elaborates with examples, quotations and statistics. His approach exhibits a wealth of knowledge and understanding. He writes with compassion and a sense of urgency. In discussing the military-industrial complex, the author questions whether so sustained a concentration of the economy

committed against nature and ourselves. Mr. McCormick feels the moralists of organized Christianity have been singularly insensitive to the poetic awareness of the natural world portrayed in the parables of the New Testament.

In one of the final chapters, "The Good Americans," he elaborates on the silent majority. In their antipathy to radical action and commitment to an ideal, they are something akin to the Victorians of whom it is said, "They would have been equally scandalized at hearing Christianity repudiated as they would have been at seeing it practiced."

In the final two chapters of the book, Mr. McCormick sees Vietnam as the training ground for professional killer attitudes which have drifted back into and permeated society as a whole. U. S. war crimes have been a reflection of the derangement of American society and a factor in its moral decline. In the chapter entitled "Man for Man," the author asserts that a drastic modification in our politics and economics, and indeed in