This bit of self-praise is supposedly the first verse ever sung in Ireland, composed by Amergin, a Milesian prince. In its conception of the role of the poet and the relation of the poet to the world, it is entirely Joycean. With unpardonable megalomania, Joyce saw himself as the bardic Demiurge of our time, creating in *Finnegans Wake* an erotic image of the universe, fluctuating but unified through time and space by language.

'It comes at a time when the imagination of the world is as ready as it was at the coming of the tales of Arthur and of the Grail for a new intoxication. The reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century has mingled with a reaction against the materialism of the nineteenth century. . . . The arts by brooding upon their own intensity have become religious, and are seeking, as I think Verhaeren has said, to create a sacred book.'

That is Yeats, in 1897, writing about the Irish Literary Movement, in 'The Celtic Element in Literature'. Not at all did he suspect that the author of the sacred book would be James Joyce.

Thomas Merton on the Contemplative Life

by Bede McGreggor, O.P.

Thomas Merton wrote in the letter in which he accepted the invitation to speak at the Congress in Bangkok where he was to die: '. . . the great problem for monasticism today is not survival but prophecy'. There are good reasons for thinking he was right. In the last few years most religious orders and congregations have been busily working on new rules and constitutions which are usually heavily loaded with quotable quotes from conciliar and post-conciliar documents, carefully worded résumés of current theological writing, and skilfully framed paragraphs of compromise intended to satisfy the demands of as many pressure groups as possible. In practice these new documents are often ignored, apart from a little tightening up here and loosening up there and the inevitable litter of commissions that will in due course produce more painfully contrived documents that will also be as much ignored as implemented! This may appear to be a cynical assessment of what is going on in religious life today. In fairness it must be pointed out that the Church ordered the search for new rules and constitutions, they are provisional and experimental, and the discussions that took place at every level prior to their formulation have initiated a

long overdue rethinking of religious life. Nevertheless, there continue to be more departures and fewer arrivals to religious life. There is no shortage of new laws but an obvious dearth of true prophets. From his new book[1] Thomas Merton emerges as one of the major prophets in contemporary religious life. It would be a pity if he goes unheard because of the din created by the staggering volume of second-rate writing on religious life.

Some of the criticisms Merton makes of institutional religious life in general and monastic life in particular may lead some to consider him a false prophet, a mere gasbag or a monk with an axe to grind. But Merton manifestly loved his monastic life and was in no sense a crank. He curtly dismisses the bellyaching type of religious: 'Certain structures need to be shaken, certain structures have to fall. We need not be revolutionaries within our institutions. Nowadays one sees too much of the neurotic rebel in the cloister, the neurotic who is interminably complaining about everything and has absolutely no intention of substituting anything positive for all this negation, the person who is always discontented and automatically throwing the blame for everything on somebody else—we don't need that. But on the other hand we don't want to go to the other extreme and just simply be ostriches, refusing to see that these institutions are in many respects outdated, and that perhaps renewal may mean the collapse of some institutional structures and starting over again with a whole new form' (p. 337). Nor is there anything superficial in Merton's trenchant criticisms. He would have little patience with those who seem to think renewal of religious life is simply a freedom to wear denims and long hair, freedom to visit pubs and theatres, freedom to indulge in the pastimes and preoccupations of secular man nor on the other hand would he start to prophesy the end of religious life because of the tendency of some religious to identify with the life styles of modern man. 'This is the real problem of monastic renewal: not a surrender to the "secular city" but a recovery of the deep desire of God that draws a man to seek a *totally new way of being in the world*' (p. 23).

He sees religious life as a freedom to consecrate oneself utterly to God and the spiritual and human service of mankind. He calls for a humanizing of religious life but not a softening of it: 'Contemplative discipline is both hard and flexible. The contemplative life should be a life in which there is austerity. There has to be a real challenge. It's got to be a tough life. This business of just softening up the contemplative life is foolish. In fact it means the end of all contemplation. But the contemplative life has to be tough in such a way that it is also liveable. The toughness of the contemplative life should not be that restricting toughness which arbitrarily rules out good possibilities. It should be a toughness that tones us up to meet

[1]*Contemplation in a World of Action*, by Thomas Merton, George Allen & Unwin. London, 384 pp., £5.50.

new possibilities, the unexpected, that for which we have not been previously capable, for which we have not been previously ready' (p. 342).

The central concern of recent papal teaching on the formation of religious is the problem of striking a balance between contemplation and apostolic action. This is also the main theme of Merton's book especially part I on Monastic Renewal and part III on Contemplative life. There is nothing new in this problem, it is as old as Christianity itself, yet it does find a new urgency today in a world that is increasingly and crushingly a world of action. The contemplative tends to see the world of action as an easy escapism and the man of action tends to see contemplative life as an even more obvious escapism from involvement in the world and the lives of other people. The contemplative would readily understand Joseph Conrad when he writes: 'It hurt Charles Gould to feel that never more, by no effort of will, would he be able to think of his father in the same way he used to think of him when the poor man was alive. His breathing image was no longer in his power. This consideration, closely affecting his own identity, filled his breast with a mournful and angry desire for action. In this his instinct was unerring. *Action is consolatory. It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions.* Only in the conduct of our action can we find the sense of mastery over Fates.' But does the contemplative satisfactorily explain his separation from the mainstream of life, his 'contemptus mundi'. Is it not God's world, cannot men equally find God in the world, working shoulder to shoulder with men from every walk of life? Is contemplative life a running away from real suffering, opting out of responsibility for the world and mankind? It will be difficult to find a better defense of strictly contemplative life than the one Merton gives us. But some contemplatives may be in for a shock, for Merton defends a contemplative life that is very different from the traditional forms of contemplative life of recent centuries.

For Merton the contemplative must be positive and open to the world and everything that is good in it. 'One important element in the programme, as formulated by Vatican II, is "openness to the world". Contemplatives are not exempt from this, but they have to understand it in their own terms. In other words, they must consider how, and to what extent, they can be "open to the world" without losing their identity as contemplatives.' The monk must be decidedly contemporary: 'The monk owes the world of his time an unworldliness proper to this time, by the grace of God and the charism of his vocation, to achieve a contemporaneous unworldliness. He is in the world and not of it. He is both in his time and of it. . . . The monk should be in the world of his time as a sign of hope for the most authentic values to which his time aspires' (p. 92). The monk must positively choose the world: 'To choose the world is not then merely a pious admission that the world is acceptable because it comes from

the hand of God. It is first of all an acceptance of a task and a vocation in the world, in history and in time. In my time, which is the present. To choose the world is to choose to do the work I am capable of doing, in collaboration with my brother, to make the world better, more free, more just, more liveable, more human. And it has now become transparently obvious that mere automatic "rejection of the world" and "contempt of the world" is in fact not a choice but the evasion of choice. The man who pretends that he can turn his back on Auschwitz or Vietnam and act as if they were not there is simply bluffing. I think this is getting to be generally admitted, even by monks' (p. 149). Merton argues convincingly his basic position that Christ and the world are not rival realities leading in different directions but we must choose the world in Christ.

Despite his extraordinary awareness and stress on the situation and problems of modern man, Merton emphasizes again and again the absolute primacy of contemplation in religious life and all the traditional values like humility, self-sacrifice, solitude, spiritual reflection, the frequent reception of the sacraments, the value of the cloister, etc. In a random but typical passage he writes: 'Contemplatives have a special slant on the theological and spiritual problems of the Church and of the world. They should be able to make their own contribution to discussions of these problems, and should be allowed, with other qualified experts, to participate in affecting the good of the whole Church. Above all, they should take a most active part in solving the problems of contemplative communities themselves and should be able to give help where it is really needed. On the other hand, if a contemplative religious becomes so caught up in these activities that he is no longer able to live a contemplative life, then the reason for his 'services' no longer exists. He is not qualified to help others in so far as he is what he is supposed to be: a contemplative. No matter what may be the need for action and service on the part of the contemplative that need must yield to the minimal demands of the contemplative life itself. In the contemplative life, action exists for the sake of contemplation and vice versa. The openness of the contemplative is justified in so far as it enables him to be a better contemplative, and to share with others the fruit of his contemplation' (p. 141).

Another recurring theme in the book is the relationship between institution and charism in religious life. This is a popular theme in much post-conciliar writing but rarely as powerfully treated as by Merton. There are some very hard things implied in some of his writing but there is more than the poverbial grain of truth in them. 'In order to understand monasticism, it is important to concentrate on the charism of the monastic vocation rather than on the structure of monastic institutions or the patterns of monastic observance. Most of the ambiguities and distresses of the current renewal seem to come from the fact that there is too much concern with changing

the observances or adapting the institution and not enough awareness of the charism which the institution is meant to serve and protect. Indeed, one sometimes feels that too many monks have put the cart before the horse, and assume that the vocation or charism exists for the sake of the institution, and that men who are called by God to the peace and inner freedom of the monastic life can be regarded as material to be exploited for the good of the monastic institution, its prestige, its money-making projects and so on' (p. 14).

In response to some of the criticisms Merton makes, some religious will inevitiably argue that he is only demolishing a caricature of religious life, or at most a pre-conciliar type of religious life, certainly not the structures and spirit of the more enlightened of the great orders and congregations, and we all belong to orders that did not really need the Council but only a reminder of our own noble—and always contemporary traditions! Still, there is not too much exaggeration when Merton writes: 'There is no question that one of the most disturbing things about the monastic institution for most of those moderns who have come seeking to give themselves to God in solitude, prayer and love, has been the current interpretation of religious vows, especially obedience. One who dedicates himself to God by vows today finds himself committed for life to a massively organized, rigidly formalistic institutional existence. Here everything is decided for him beforehand. Everything is provided for by rule and system. Initiative is not only discouraged, it becomes useless. Questions cease to have any point, for you already know the answers by heart in advance. But the trouble is that they are not answers, since they imply a firm decision to ignore your questions. Obedience then no longer consists in dedicating one's will and love to the service of God, but almost the renunciation of all human rights, needs and feelings in order to conform to the rigid demands of an institution. The institution is identified with God, and becomes an end in itself. And the monk is given to understand from the start that there is no alternative for him but to regard this institutional life in all its details, however arbitrary, however archaic, however meaningless to him, as the only way for him to be perfect in love and sincere in his quest for God. This has been impressed upon him not only as a most solemn religious duty but almost as an article of faith: indeed, the young monk who has serious problems with a life that may seem to him increasingly fruitless and even absurd, may be forcefully told that he is failing in Christian faith and verging on apostasy' (p. 19).

It takes enormous courage for any religious to speak out on the problems, the needed reforms and deficiencies of institutionalized religious life. His fellow religious will tend to put him under judgment rather than his ideas and it is not always easy to see where loyalty ends and disloyalty to the community begins. Yet while being

grateful for and admiring the courage of Thomas Merton I do not pretend to agree with or to understand everything he puts forward. His chapter on obedience is particularly helpful but some of his ideas on the vows in general are puzzling to me. He seriously raises the questions, legitimate enough in itself, as to whether the vows are necessary for the monastic life or not: 'Whether or not vows can still mean this to modern man I will not attempt to decide here. For my own part, I still think they can, or I would not keep mine. But at the same time I am convinced that a monastic life without vows is quite possible and perhaps very desirable. It might have many advantages. (There are, in fact, some members of monastic communities—oblates—who live like the other monks but without vows)' (p. 195). I wish Merton had explained points like this one in more detail. It may be true that the values of monastic life can be found and lived without vows but surely the vows are the most effective way of attaining them.

From the many passages I have quoted one could easily imagine that Merton is merely destructively critical of contemporary monastic life. This would be utterly false. It would simply mean that the quotations are not truly representative. There is a constructive, optimistic and encouraging tone throughout this book. It is practical and realistic, too. He believes that the most important and necessary part of renewal is within the power of individual religious. They don't have to wait in frustration until the massive machinery of religious government begins to grind. 'What are you seeking? Are you seeking security or are you seeking God? Are you seeking pleasant experiences or are you seeking the Truth? . . . Are we seeking the truth that is to make us free? Are we seeking the truth of Christ? Are we responding to the Word of God which breaks through all structures of human life and institutions? These are the things which we have to ask ourselves. *We can hardly expect others to answer these things for us!* . . . The important thing for us is to clarify our aims and to rethink not only the accidentals but even the essentials of the contemplative life—in the sense of re-thinking our aims, our motives and ends. What do we come to the contemplative life for? Each of us may have a different answer. And let us not make the mistake of imagining ourselves rethinking the life in order to re-legislate it. In other words, let us not kid ourselves by talking now and living later. If our re-thinking is valid it is also a re-living. Don't let's get lost in words. Let's live now. Let us not project ourselves too far ahead. Let us live in the Present. Our re-thinking of the contemplative life is part of our present contemplation. Our new life will emerge from authenticity *now*. This is not merely an empty moment of transition. We are not in an interval of dynamic reconstruction in which we are simply going to put back together again a static life in which we will rest. Our rest is in the reconstruction itself. Transition is also fullness. We can have a certain personal fullness even when the

changing institution is provisional, and we have to learn to be able to be contemplatives in the midst of the dynamic, in the midst of movement' (p. 339).

Religious communities are becoming more and more like discussion clubs. This book raises questions that would make these discussions more worthwhile. Without doubt it is one of the best books on monastic and religious life since the council. It has a lot of lessons for both the destructive progressives and conservatives and much encouragement for constructive religious who love the religious life but are beginning to lose heart.

COMMENT (*Continued from page 436*)

the ruling class is outweighed by the chance at last to create a strong cross-border working class movement.

It goes without saying that the introduction of democracy to Northern Ireland has to be accompanied by similar moves in the South. Some things can be done immediately. The trivial matter of removing the 'special position' of the Roman Catholic Church from the Constitution will in any case be dealt with in November, there will need to be more pressure for new legislation on the sale of contraceptives, but much more important is the rescinding of recent repressive legislation and, of course, the Curragh camp will have to be pulled down on the same day as Long Kesh. The more difficult and lengthy task of prising the clerical grip off education and welfare services may have to await the co-operation of the northern Protestants, though in the North itself, the Catholic Church authorities need not wait so long before moving towards integrated education and adopting, as other hierarchies do, a more liberal interpretation of what used to be the *Ne Temere* decree. I do not myself think, any more than do most Northern Protestants, that in all these matters we can take an easy liberal secularist line; there are unpredictable dangers in tampering, even in the most apparently rational way, with the ecology of a culture, but, to say it once more, there is no hope for the future without risks for everybody. England's intervention in Ireland over the centuries has created so much fear and insecurity in the country that there is little room for faith; but faith is the only possible foundation for hope and for love.

H. McC.