

Book Reviews

**Thomas Merton – Twentieth-Century
Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century
Living**

Paul R Dekar
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In this well-written and thought-provoking book Paul Dekar guides the reader through Merton's prophetic writings, and shows how they can be used as a guide to the formation of a new monasticism, one primarily of lay people connecting traditional monastic spirituality and practice with the demands of our modern world. This is not a theoretical textbook. One of the strengths of the book is that the

author practices what he preaches. First inspired by Merton's writings thirty-five years ago, the author is now Professor Emeritus of Evangelism and Mission at Memphis Theological Seminary, a prolific author, and working with Communities of hope in Canada; he is also a member of a new monastic community in Australia. Not only that but each chapter contains reflections on how from his own knowledge and experience the ideas he puts forward are being worked out in new monastic communities across North America.

After a brief introduction and a succinct overview of Merton's life and work the author examines in detail five specific aspects of Merton's writings:

Monastic Renewal—The author details Merton's developing ideas about how the then current monastic practices should be altered, and how monastic practice might be formed for the twentieth century that 'embraces not only the Mystery of Christ, but also the modern world of science, technology and revolution' (p.46). By the end of his life Merton had come to realise that he had been called to the monastery not to escape from the world, but to engage with it at the deepest level, in suffering and transformation.

Simplification of Life—As quoted by the author, for Merton simplicity consisted of, 'getting rid of everything that did not help the monk to arrive at union with God by the shortest possible way.' The author details how we could use Merton's ideas to help us simplify our own lives, and unencumber ourselves from everything that prevents us being our truest self, a difficult task in this frenetic materialistic world. As he so clearly shows, 'Merton's monastic spirituality accents the right use of God's gifts and offers an antidote to the malaise of modernity' (p.84).

Guide to the Right Use of Technology—The author highlights Merton's main concerns with technology, identifying its destructive capability, its distorting effect on our true humanity, and its distracting power. He demonstrates how 'Merton could be quite despairing, believing that the fixation with

technology in the West blinds people to the reality of the spiritual world' (p.103).

Care of Earth—This chapter details Merton's concerns about how the mindless behaviour of humans is destroying our planet, and identifies Merton's two main courses of action. Firstly that mankind is not above nature, but must acknowledge its interconnection with it; and secondly that we all need to recognise that we are custodians of creation. Merton clearly sensed that the world was becoming enveloped in an ecological crisis, but as the author recognises, 'he did not live long enough to delineate a concrete action plan' (p.126). The chapter ends with a moving reflection on the biblical concept of the Jubilee and what the adoption of its ideals of reconciliation, justice and restitution might mean for mankind.

The Root of War is Fear—The author gives a clear summary of Merton's anti-war writings, and how though thwarted by his superiors to a certain extent, he expressed 'the immorality of modern warfare with clarity and wisdom' (p.141). There is a substantial section dealing with the influence that Gandhi had on Merton, and how both their legacies still contribute to communities and organisations engaged in non-violent action. A further section highlights the importance of dialogue to Merton, not only with other Christians, but with those of other faiths and other cultures. For the author 'peace-making, non-

violence, and dialogue are at once essential practices, and a way of life' (p.157).

The final two chapters of the book show how these ideas are currently being worked out by several communities in North America, detailing their rules, practice and way of life. Rule is perhaps a misnomer—they all declare their stance and beliefs in a variety of forms—the Little Mandate, the Resolve, a Mission Statement, Tools for Change, a New Benedictine Charter—the text of all these being included in the book. What these communities all have in common is that they are responding to Christ's call to 'love one another'. As Merton wrote in *Springs of Contemplation*, 'Live in community, have community of love, let God dwell right here among you' (p.186).

The book has a forward by Paul Pearson and, as appendices, two hitherto unpublished transcriptions of talks that Merton gave at Gethsemani in 1966, 'The Christian in a Technological World' and 'Marxism and Technology'. One of the drawbacks of the book is that there is no general index, making it hard to refer back to passages. It does include a comprehensive bibliography of books by and about Merton and other relevant resources such as films and web-based material. The book is one of ten volumes published to date in a series called the New Monastic Library. As such I hope that people from a variety of Christian back-

grounds may encounter Merton's writings for the first time, and so would benefit from a list of suggested texts for further reading—alas not included.

At the start of the book the author states that, 'having experienced Merton's writings as a source of growth for myself and for many others, I now write for all persons seeking to enrich their lives, to find their place in the world, and to experience community' (p.9). The author clearly shows us how we might rise to the challenge of such a calling, using Merton as a guide to building communities of love, and I would recommend this book wholeheartedly to anybody who wishes to join him on such a journey.

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