

written by the young and fervent Merton about his conversion and his understanding of 'the supernatural destinies of the elect ... hidden in the hands of God' (p.3). It is worth contrasting this with the final essay from 1968 which is the more well-known 'Final Integration: Towards a "Monastic Therapy"'. In this paper the mature Merton reflects on the Christian mystery of paschal transformation and the necessary psychological and spiritual work undertaken. He draws on Jungian thinking and Sufism noting contemporary cultural issues including the Christian tendency to become aligned with the 'capitalist Western establishment' (p. 462). For Merton, the path for final integration for the individual and for the community lies beyond the restrictions of any culture —including Christian culture.

There are general criticisms that have been made both of so-called fabricated books of selections of Merton's writings, and of the whole industry of Merton studies which shows no sign of slowing down. However, even as we approach the centenary of Merton's birth he still inspires great interest and attracts many spiritual seekers. A volume such as this offers both the new reader and the old hand much of interest and much that is thought-provoking.

Fiona Gardner

*A shorter version of this review will be published in Modern Believing.*

### **Thinking Through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times**

Robert Inchausti

State University of New York Press  
Albany, 2014

ISBN 9781438449463

vii + 172 pages

£13.30

With his 1998 work, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, Robert Inchausti portrayed Merton against the backdrop of American intellectual history, with special attention to the relationship between Merton's work and the postmodern trends which had impacted theological discourse, particularly during the 1990s. This latest offering from Inchausti continues in a similar vein whilst expanding the horizons and assessing Merton's contribution to intellectual and religious history in relation to more global theological trends.

Whereas the earlier work covered a lot of biographical ground, Inchausti's new publication maps for the reader the range of biographical, critical and primary material available to the reader of 'the already explicated Merton'. The two books complement one another effectively. After half a century of scrutiny, memoir and evaluation, Merton's public presence continues to grow and evolve, and Inchausti's reassessment is a welcome overview not only of Merton's accomplishment, but also of how his work has been interpreted and evaluated dur-

ing the years since his death. Highlighting those episodes he considers to be key turning points in Merton scholarship and the public reception of Merton (such as the publication of his letters or *The Inner Experience*, or the production of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopaedia*), Inchausti in refreshingly direct style dismisses some of the 'competing ideological simplifications of Merton's work,' reminding us of the monk-writer's engagingly sophisticated style and the range of his reach. He reads Merton in relation to (some) recent trends in philosophy and theology, highlighting as his 'most dangerous idea' Merton's pacifism, his implicit or direct critique of a society fuelled by violent competitiveness and anxiety. Other than for occasional asides – where, for example, he aligns Merton with Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* (which may reveal differences between British and American theological perspectives) - Inchausti has made a convincing case that Merton implicitly anticipated the shifts in theological tenor and style which followed in his wake. Invoking memories of the fresh breeze (some might say tornado) which Merton stirred up during the 1950s and 1960s, Inchausti asserts that:

His works demonstrate a radical suspicion of neoliberal assumptions, a systematic decentering of Enlightenment assumptions, a preferential option for the poor, a

proto-theology of liberation, an emphasis upon concrete human experience, and the value of a plurality of religious expressions. Moreover, they provide a reading of history in which technological progress stands under judgment.... (p.128)

It is the emphasis upon his own 'concrete human experience' which sets Merton aside from both a more speculative theological discourse (and from the likes of Milbank) and from a 'kitsch' spiritual reductionism: the point is rightly emphasized in the first chapter where Inchausti makes clear that Merton's ideas and his monastic commitment are inextricably bound together. Merton shows the reader how to rethink (or to re-discover) theology as a way of living and of participating in God, rather than as a system of ideas. A real strength of this book is in its detailed, chronological account of Merton scholarship, commentary and publication history, described here as a kind of extension and development of Merton's own work. In this regard, the Appendix, 'Some Milestones of Merton Scholarship,' is particularly useful to new researchers or other readers becoming acquainted with the array of primary and secondary material currently available. Readers familiar with the Merton corpus may quibble over the evaluation of particular 'milestones,' but that may be the kind of continuing discourse which

Inchausti is here encouraging and celebrating. *Thinking Through Thomas Merton* is arguably as much a celebration of the secondary scholarship as it is of Merton. It is the kind of broad-stroke, theologically adept contribution we need on the threshold of a Merton centenary, and it will serve well those who are familiar with Merton and his commentators, and those who are less familiar but interested in how to approach Merton from scholarly or religious perspectives. The book ends with a quotation from *The Inner Experience*, introduced with a heartfelt comment about more hasty or careless representations of Merton and his ideas:

I have no doubt that [Merton's] reputation will survive even this 'public comment' phase of his career, provided serious readers and students of his work follow his contemplative lead and do not confuse such opinions and misrepresentations with his actual thinking. (p.143)

Amen to that. Inchausti has once again done serious readers of Merton a great service.

Gary Hall