

**Divine Discontent: The prophetic voice of Thomas Merton**

John Moses — forward by Rowan Williams

Bloomsbury

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£20

One of the first questions I was asked by my academic adviser when I was formulating a focus for my PHD was: 'Why study a dead monk?' My immediate response was, 'Why not?' But on deeper reflection, what appealed to me about Merton were his contradictions and challenges. There is a particular effort involved in engaging with his writing, through which we can glimpse and perhaps come to know this multifaceted man.

Now, almost fifty years since the death of Thomas Merton, and one hundred years since his birth, his influence as a prophetic voice remains as strong as it was in the '40s, '50s and '60s. It is this fascination with the many facets of Merton that John Moses, Dean Emeritus of St Paul's Cathedral, London, exploits to reveal Merton through the discontents, human and divine, that were a feature of his life.

Through this accomplished work, Moses draws on Merton's public as well as private writing in journals and letters, and offers fresh insights through his originality of interpretation. Part of the book's appeal to readers of Merton in the 21st century is that Moses demonstrates with clarity his undeniable relevance today. Merton lives through his published works, and through the films, books, theses and conferences, Facebook pages and Twitter feeds of scholars, fans and those with a passing interest, and Moses' book helps to unpick precisely why this is.

*Divine Discontent* is crafted around aspects of Merton's life. Moses seeks to explore three key questions: Why is Merton so fascinating, what meaning should we give to his contradictions and discontents, and in what areas of contemporary concern does Merton speak with a prophetic voice? Moses' response to these questions is to explore our fascination with this man before examining his life and thought as a monk, writer, contemplative, social critic, and ecumenist. Finally, Moses offers a study in Merton's 'divine discontent' and an analysis of his prophetic voice. While this book wouldn't fit the traditional idea of biography, there is careful use of biographical stories; and the detailed chronology at the start of the book serves as a reminder of important events in Merton's life, as well as giving the dates of posthumous publications.

For Merton, the search for God was paramount, and this shines through Moses' analysis. He shows us Merton's style of discipleship

('open, engaged, compassionate, critical') through his 'discontents' and so remains anchored in Merton's humanity. The man we read of here is *real* and the portrait presented is captivating.

Will *Divine Discontent* help my studies? Undoubtedly, especially when read alongside other trusted texts. But more than that, this book helps the reader to connect with a powerful and compelling voice in twentieth century spirituality, and discover, or rediscover, the man that Merton was. *Divine Discontent* is a truly beautiful and insightful read. And if ever I am asked again, 'Why study a dead monk?' I would offer Moses' book and say: 'This. This is why.'

**Elizabeth Holmes** is a writer, teacher and lecturer, currently undertaking a PhD in her spare time on Thomas Merton's monastic theology and interreligious dialogues. She serves on the committee of the TMS and is the poetry editor of the Journal.

**Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary**

Michael W. Higgins

Liturgical Press

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ISBN 9780814637067 (pbk) xiv + 122 pages

\$12.95

*Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* is one of the first three volumes in a new series of brief biographies (along with lives of John XXIII and Oscar Romero) of significant and influential modern Catholics. As the series title 'People of God' suggests, these figures are being presented at least implicitly as exemplifying the vision of the Church developed by the Second Vatican Council, a perspective that makes the prolific Canadian Catholic intellectual Michael Higgins, both a Merton scholar with a broad and deep knowledge of his subject and a highly respected commentator on the wider Catholic ethos of the past half-century, an excellent choice to author the Merton volume. Aimed primarily at the general reader without extensive acquaintance with the details of the Merton story, this fast-paced, engaging and at times provocative narrative is not without its attractions for those more familiar with the monk's life and work as well.

Among the most appealing elements of the book are the extensive quotations integrated throughout the book that are drawn from interviews with Merton friends (among them Robert Lax, Br. Patrick Hart