

(‘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.

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### **Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary**

Michael W. Higgins

Liturgical Press

Collegeville, MN, USA, 2014

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

and Daniel Berrigan) and scholars (including biographer Michael Mott, editor Christine Bochen, critic Ross Labrie and many others), made by Higgins and his colleagues in the Canadian media for various radio and television programs over the years. These informal yet insightful commentaries provide material available nowhere else in print – fresh perspectives that are particularly enjoyable precisely because they have a kind of spontaneity and immediacy not always present in more formal ‘worked-over’ written observations. They are a special treat for the more experienced Merton reader who is already familiar with the facts of Merton’s life but not with these observations from such a broad spectrum of commentators (though the transcriptions are not always perfectly accurate – publisher Donald Brace of Harcourt is twice referred to as ‘Grace’).

Given the brief compass of barely more than 100 pages, and perhaps the series parameters as well, it is not surprising that the life receives considerably more attention than the works. In his seven chapters, the author recounts almost all the major events and key turning points of Merton’s life though there is one surprising lacuna – this must surely be the only Merton biography that makes no mention of the ‘epiphany’ at Fourth and Walnut!

At the same time, Higgins does not overlook the tensions in Merton’s life between his desire for solitude and his almost obsessive desire to write, his problematic relationship with his abbot and periodic urge to transfer to another, ostensibly more solitary order, his brief but intense experience of falling in love at age 51 with a nurse about half his age. In fact, given the brief compass of the volume, some readers might consider focusing two of the seven chapters on ‘Abbot Problems’ and ‘Seized Love’ to be somewhat disproportionate (though neither chapter is concerned exclusively with the issues named in their titles). But for Higgins the complex, conflicted dimensions of Merton’s experience are not simply a source of recurrent dissatisfaction and self-doubt but a spur to creativity, and his restlessness serves as a strong deterrent to settling for conventional stereotypes and unexamined assumptions, or allowing himself to become a stereotype or caricature either of the pious monk or of the iconoclastic maverick.

Higgins refers to, and quotes principally from, Merton’s journals and letters as providing access to Merton’s inner development and inner (and outer) struggles. But what is evidently a deliberate decision not to attempt to provide some sort of summary of Merton’s thought might lead the uninitiated to wonder somewhat why and how – beyond *The Seven*

*Storey Mountain* – Merton continued (and continues) to exert such a powerful hold on readers. The major volumes of spiritual meditation that were so popular in Merton’s ‘middle period’ – *No Man Is an Island*, *Thoughts in Solitude*, *New Seeds of Contemplation* – are not mentioned at all in the book, nor is *The New Man* or the posthumously published *The Inner Experience*, more discursive expositions of his religious and contemplative vision. A couple of brief examples of his social commentary from *Seeds of Destruction* are included, but nothing from the later collection *Faith and Violence*; likewise a single passage from *Mystics and Zen Masters* relates to his interreligious involvement, but its successor *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* is not even listed in the bibliography, nor is *Contemplation in a World of Action*, the posthumous collection of his major writings on monastic renewal. Relatively more attention than is typical is given to Merton’s poetry, which is all to the good, but it might have been complemented with a brief consideration of his extensive work as an essayist. In some ways writing a short book, especially about so prolific and so wide-ranging a thinker and writer as Thomas Merton, is no doubt more difficult than writing a long one, and while one can appreciate the many merits of the profile Michael Higgins has provided, one may also regret the omission of significant aspects of Merton’s thinking and writing that so observant and insightful a commentator has not been able to consider here.

**Patrick F. O'Connell** is editor of *The Merton Seasonal*, as well as co-author of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*. He has edited seven volumes of Merton’s monastic conferences, as well as Merton’s *Selected Essays* (2013) and *Early Essays* (2015).

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Notice is also given of the latest film by **Morgan Atkinson**, *The Many Storeys and Final Days of Thomas Merton*. This documentary concentrates on the last year of Merton’s life and includes interviews with, amongst others, the Dalai Lama, Richard Rohr, Paul Quenon and James Finley. Further details may be found at: <http://www.tommerton.com>

The \$12,000 needed to produce this film was raised by crowdfunding, the money being donated in small amounts by a large number of people. The Society made a contribution of \$200. It is hoped to screen the film at a future event, possibly at our 2016 conference if there is space on the programme.