

course, nothing other than the ecstasy of living which Van Doren perceptively saw and which characterises the language of the real mystic as opposed to the spirituality addict. It passes the authenticity test by taking us beyond ourselves, not to a fantasy, but to the tangible and transcendent realities of creation. He spells it out in a stunning passage in which he recognises the weirdness on the way to truth:

the undersea vision, even at shallow depths, is almost narcotic, whatever is seen is seen with such peace, such composure. to look thus wide-eyed at all phenomena would surely be a kind of joy, a kind of psychic nourishment.

Towards the end of his life Lax was known to read only one thing each day: a passage from the writings of the spiritual teacher Eknath Easwaran, a student of Ghandi, who developed a meditation discipline which drew on the teachings of all the major religious traditions. It was this, Lax's willingness and ability to focus and go deep, to go under, that enabled him to surface with such profound clarity. Lovers and readers of Merton are accustomed to the practice of needing to read the same sentence over and over again. The work of his old friend invites us to embrace that practice as an art form, an intention, and a hidden joy.

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The quotations from the book under review are taken from pages 23, 52, 81, 43 & 48 respectively.

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**The Many Storeys and Last Days of Thomas Merton**  
**A documentary film written and produced by Morgan Atkinson**  
**Duckworth, Inc. 2014. 60 minutes. \$25 US, \$37 elsewhere**  
**[www.morganatkinson.com](http://www.morganatkinson.com)**

In this film we are given a short introduction to Thomas Merton's life in the monastery and his ongoing struggle with Abbot Dom James Fox over the direction of his vocation. His wish to visit Asia was finally granted when Dom James Fox retired and the young Dom Flavian Burns was

installed as the new abbot of Gethsemani. He had been a novice under Merton and greatly admired and respected him as a spiritual teacher. He did not consider his desire to become a hermit or to visit Asia as a potential cause for scandal or threat to the young monks in the novitiate or to the wider faith community.

Morgan Atkinson concentrates on the last few months of his life and his momentous trip to Asia which resulted in his untimely and tragic death in Bangkok.

Having just returned from India, I think the film succeeds in giving us a very powerful sense of the excitement, the energy, beauty and chaos which is India and her people. Merton's account of his encounter with a young beggar girl whom he feels he has to abandon because he has no rupees captures the constant sense I had, and the many I have spoken to, of their experience with the beggars in India. Their poverty is heart breaking and extreme. You know that they have developed a strategy to deal with rich tourists, one which is intended to make you feel uncomfortable and challenged. Why not? says Merton. What else should they do? And if you give to one a dozen will follow in their wake. He has a clear eyed understanding of their position. There is no patronisation, no judgement, no blame—that's just the way it is.

Harold Talbot, one of the contributors to the film who was staying in Dharamsala with the Dalai Lama and gave up his bed for Merton, said that for Merton this was not a visit but an event. There was a palpable sense of joyous energy, an insatiable curiosity and humility about his involvement with the people and the places he visited. 'I am going with questions not answers.' And his visit posed many questions indeed. How do we embrace a world with so much suffering and poverty and maintain a sense of gratitude and belief in Gods goodness and mercy? India in particular poses this question at a very profound level.

His visit to the Dalai Lama was a great success with both men recognising a brother of deep spiritual depth. The Dalai Lama in his interview for the film talked about carrying on the tradition. He feels a great sense of responsibility to carry the message to the world. Many consider the Dalai Lama to be one of the spiritual giants of our age. He sees Thomas Merton as the father and he the faithful son who must carry on bringing the flame of hope and love to a world which desperately needs to hear this message. He finishes his interview by saying, 'one is good, ten is better, but we all must do something.' Mainstream Christianity has traditionally tended to ignore the inner life and contemplative dimension of its followers, focusing on social action.

Conversely the Eastern traditions have tended to ignore the social life of their adherents emphasising the inner and contemplative life. Thomas Merton was increasingly interested in integrating these two vital aspects of the spiritual life.

The film contains insightful and penetrating comments from a variety of speakers, some of who had known him and others who only knew him through his works. We heard that the sale of his work is not diminishing but is in fact increasing since the time of his death. The breadth of his vision ensures a wide variety of followers who claim him for their own. All of these contributions add to the richness of his legacy.

But as the film poses the question 'What is his legacy?', I think it would have benefited greatly from interviewing some young people about what his life and works have to teach them with his gospel of social action, contemplation, and his respect and interest in other faiths and traditions. How have his ideas filtered down to them and in what way could they apply his teaching to their own lives and the life of society?

We are seeing the phenomenon of Bernie Sanders in America and Jeremy Corbyn in Britain, two politicians well past their prime, who are disseminating a very powerful message of social justice and change which has been welcomed as a refreshing change to the usual message that the status quo prevails. They have surprised and confounded the political establishment and its power brokers. One of the most surprising aspects of this phenomenon is that many of their followers are young people who everyone thought so individualistic and apathetic that many do not even vote and do not really care about society. How wrong they are! Their enthusiasm and energy for change and social justice is infectious and exhilarating. Long may it continue! Merton would have been standing alongside them.

I enjoyed the film immensely. Thomas Merton's love of life, his abiding curiosity and joy, seemed to affect all who met him. It makes a great tribute to a man who Dom James Fox said was not very sure of himself, and who, despite this and his profound awareness of his own human frailty, had the courage and tenacity to explore the truth wherever that path took him.

**Patricia Higgins** is a retired teacher who lives in London. She has served on the TMS committee since 2014. She has become increasingly interested in the nature of the relationship between mysticism and resistance. She is a member of the W.C.C.M. (World Community of Christian Meditation) and is actively involved in issues around the cause of the Palestinians and that of the environment.