

volume) was for me the most accessible section of the book. Chapter six returns to systematic theology, discussing Russian theologians Soloviev, Bulgakov and Evdokimov. The chapter relies heavily on Paul Valliere's *Modern Russian Theology* (Eerdmans, 2000) as the reading of 'Hagia Sophia' depended on Susan McCaslin's essay 'Merton and "Hagia Sophia"' in *Merton and Hesychasm* (Fons Vitae, 2003). The conclusion summarises previous material (pp.279-281) and reprises the initial observation that 'Merton was not a systematician but a mystical theologian, a poet of the presence of God...' (p.293).

Several omissions are noticeable. There is no evidence of readily available primary material from the various Merton archives on subjects the book treats. Articles on Merton and Wisdom, the Russians, and other theologians Pramuk mentions which have appeared in *The Merton Seasonal*, *The Merton Annual* and *The Merton Journal* were absent, as were standard reference works by Breit & Daggy and Patricia Burton from the bibliography (which perhaps explain the lacunae). In general, secondary material on Merton is thin and uneven. Absence of any discussion of Islam, which Merton also began to study in the 1950s, seems strange in view of the book's interest in visionary epistemology and the Eastern Church.

Pramuk's presentations of the nature of religious language and of visionary experience/mysticism as ways of knowing are precise and helpful especially since Merton is more poet than systematics professor. Pramuk's expansive knowledge of thinkers in the late 19th and 20th centuries is impressive, his commentary on many is enlightening. But, for me, the

lauded theological framing, while interesting in itself, did not always illuminate Merton's thought. (Again, this may be because I come to Merton 'by another way'.) I was certainly left with a profound sense of my limitations as a reviewer of theological argument and a corresponding humility in the presence of this young and very able scholar whose work after the dissertation I eagerly await.

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**Beneath the Mask of Holiness:
Thomas Merton and the Forbidden Love
Affair that Set Him Free**

Mark Shaw

Palgrave Macmillan

New York, 2009

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Hardcover, 256 pages

£18.99

I dislike negative reviews. A lot of work goes into a book from a number of people and their efforts merit respect. However, the truth needs to be told. In this case the truth is that the work has been misdirected, and this is not a respectable book.

I am left with the uneasy feeling that this is quite a cynical book, as well as being misguided. Cynical because it goes to huge lengths to project a particular slant on Merton's life and in particular his relationship with Margie, the nurse who cared for him following his back operation in St Joseph's Hospital, Louis-

ville in March 1966. The book's chosen trajectory is a series of passes over Merton's biography to apparently portray him as a guilt-stricken, sex-obsessed fraud, continually at war with an abbot who held him prisoner. It reads like someone raking through bin bags to accumulate sleazy details.

So why would such a person ever join a monastery? Mr Shaw enlightens us that Merton was draft-dodging. This will seem extraordinary to anyone with a balanced sense of Merton's turbulent run-up to his entry to Gethsemani, but then balance is not something that the book is interested in.

As I waded further into the book's turgid purple prose, I was hoping this was the work of a young tabloid journalist who had newly discovered Merton, and gone off on a mistaken tack. In fact Mr Shaw has a theology degree, as well as a legal background; he even briefly joined the International Thomas Merton Society. Many of his previous books have been co-authored and probably for good reason. He has tendencies that need to be held in check, and haven't been here.

Maybe the legal background would account for the badgering, repetitious, hectoring tone that tries to compensate for the flimsiness of his case. But there is no reason to omit basic research. Mark Shaw makes very little effort to understand the workings of a Cistercian monastery or the Vatican in Merton's time. As a result, he bases his thesis on complete misconceptions. Merton would have been astonished to learn that he was 'being promoted by the Catholic Church as its great teacher and philosopher'; he thought he had difficulties with censors, to the extent of circulating the Cold War Let-

ters as mimeographs to a private network. He also asserts baldly that, 'In 1951, Merton became Master of Novices', which is out by four years; a fundamental error.

Shaw makes the mistake of following in many details Monica Furlong's wrong-headed biography, with its misreading of monastic relationships. So Abbot Fox is cast as a stage villain, cruelly 'imprisoning' Merton (how this was achieved is never quite explained), instead of being seen as the Abbot who had to deal with a complex, demanding character, went on his knees regularly before Merton as his personal confessor, and appointed him first as Master of Scholastics, then to the crucially important position of Novice Master, one of the great offices of trust within a community. Merton's flirtations with other monastic options are taken entirely seriously. Shaw seems to have no concept that anything he writes in his private journal could be Merton letting off steam, or written in the heat of the moment.

Shaw's central contention is that the Catholic Church conspired to expurgate Merton's manuscript for *The Seven Storey Mountain*, because his past was too awful to be exposed to public gaze. In fact most of the editing was done by Robert Giroux as his publisher, because Merton had yet to learn the benefits of concision. Actually many readers quietly prefer *Elected Silence*, the even more edited version prepared for the English edition by Evelyn Waugh, though Giroux always hated it.

Shaw's misconceptions pale into insignificance beside his writing style. Instead of charting Merton's progress with some well chosen excerpts, he resorts to paraphrasing, with speculative embellish-

ments. The effect is to suck the life out of Merton, making his biography bathetic and banal. There are moments of unintended comedy as Merton is portrayed as a skilled multi-tasker: 'Merton returned to his apartment with friends. He slept for a few hours as they talked, smoked and listened to a Bix Beiderbecke record. He then left to pick up a breakfast of scrambled eggs, toast and coffee, before settling on the floor to chat away.'

Shaw neglects Merton's poetry, surely the key to understanding and appreciating his emotional and spiritual development. He also wilfully omits any real discussion of the Cuban experience which sealed his priestly vocation, or of Proverb, the young girl who appeared in one of his dreams in 1958 and was subsumed into Hagia Sophia, an important, subtle and delicate stage in Merton's integration of the feminine which culminated in the relationship with Margie. But subtle and delicate don't appear to be within Mr Shaw's range. He seems addicted to the sensational, so many passages conclude with vacuous rhetorical questions. He even weaves in a supposed headline that might have appeared had Merton left the monastery for Margie, and you can sense his bitter disappointment that he couldn't reference it.

A good book could certainly be written about Merton's emotional development, his experience with women and personal struggle to integrate the feminine. This is not it. A fine place to start would be Fiona Gardner's perceptive essay 'Beyond Gender' in *The Merton Journal* of Advent 2002. This escaped Mr Shaw, though it would clearly not have suited his unsubtle approach.

The ability to appreciate nuance and

register is not there; we get only booming statements in primary colours, shakily expressed. For Mark Shaw, Merton at the end, all thanks to Margie, had 'reached the perfection' of his 'new rebirth'. As for most of us, Merton's voyage towards spiritual maturity within the monastic life was a bit more complicated. Shaw has no sense that it might be something like layers sliding off an onion, with each disillusionment contributing to a widening and deepening sense of his personal frailty becoming rooted in God's mercy and love.

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Spiritual Masters For All Seasons

Michael Ford

HiddenSpring (Paulist Press)

Mahwah, New Jersey, 2009

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\$18.00

Michael Ford, writer, theologian and broadcaster, here presents four celebrated Christian writers, theologians, broadcasters—and spiritual masters—of the twentieth century. The book was 'largely inspired' by Ford's visit to the Abbey of Gethsemani, and Merton takes centre-stage in the company of Henri Nouwen,